

THE GATE MARKED "PRIVATE"

ETHEL M. DELL

Louise Fehrenbach.

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BY

ETHEL M. DELL

AUTHOR OF
THE LAMP IN THE DESERT,
THE BLACK KNIGHT,
GREATHEART, ETC.



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THE GATE MARKED "PRIVATE"

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by

Ethel Mary Savage

The Way of an Eagle
The Knave of Diamonds
The Rocks of Valpré
The Keeper of the Door
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The Hundredth Chance
Greatheart
The Lamp in the Desert
The Tidal Wave
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The Black Knight
The House of Happiness, and Other Stories
Peggy by Request
The Gate Marked "Private"

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THE GATE MARKED “PRIVATE”

PART I

CHAPTER I

A COCK PHEASANT

THERE came the whir of wings from the edge of the Long Copse on the northern boundary of Staple Farm, followed immediately by the sharp report of a gun, and a bird came hurtling down through the deepening dusk of the November day and fell with a thud on the ploughed land that stretched away from the copse to the sky-line in a low even rise. The man with the gun spoke to his dog who plunged forward in a hustle of swift obedience and brought the dead bird to his master's feet. There was a movement in the copse as he stooped to pick it up, and another man came out into the open and moved over the heavy ground towards him.

“A fine cock pheasant that!” he remarked, as he drew near. “I thought you'd get him.”

“It wasn't much of a shot,” said the man with the gun.

“I've seen worse,” said the other. He took the bird and turned to mount the rise. “I suppose you'll knock off now.”

“I'd have liked a brace,” said the man with the gun.

"Can't always have what you want," observed his companion, beginning to trudge up the hill.

The man with the gun turned to his dog. "Just you remember that, Nero!" he said.

Nero, a pleasant cocker-spaniel of superlative intelligence and almost unimaginable greed, shook his ears with vehemence in obvious disagreement. His master stooped and patted his head. "You're nothing but an earth-worm, my boy," he said. "You've never wanted the moon."

Nero had not. He was of a generally contented disposition notwithstanding his rapacity for food, and beyond this a walk-up with the gun was all he asked of life. He considered Silas Hickory the supreme It of existence. So far as Nero was concerned, he controlled the whole world, and Nero was completely satisfied with the way he did it.

He followed him now very closely through the November twilight, still keenly alert to obey his slightest bidding though aware that the shooting was over for the day.

They reached the top of the rise and found the other man awaiting them, with the evening's sport—a couple of rabbits and the pheasant—slung on his shoulder.

"I'll take the rabbits," said Hickory. "You take the pheasant round to Little Staple, Peter, and leave it with my compliments!"

"Right O!" said Peter.

He turned to go by way of a stile that led through the copse, but was detained by Silas Hickory's voice. "And by the way, Peter, if you should see Miss Bobby, tell her I'll be pleased to give her a lift into Bode market tomorrow if she cares for one! Got that?"

Peter stood with his hand on the rail, considering. "It seems to me," he said slowly, "that as you've got such a lot to say to her it wouldn't be altogether unreasonable to go and say it yourself."

Silas Hickory threw up his head with a gesture which, though wholly unconscious, had in it a hint of arrogance. It was the action of a well-bred animal resenting the spur.

"You get on with the job!" he said curtly, and turned on his heel in the other direction.

Peter got over the stile with thoughtful movements and walked away along the little winding path that led through the Long Copse.

There was another stile at the further end, and when he reached it he paused again and made a grave remark into the bleak silence around him. It was the summing-up of his meditation.

"And he's not such a damn' fool neither!" he said.

Silas, walking quietly along the ridge with his dog behind him, was also deep in thought. The winter day was closing in with a cold, misty rain and his boots squelched drearily over the muddy ground. But it was obvious that the weather had no sort of effect upon him. His progress had something irresistible, even fateful about it. His big square form moved with machine-like steadiness. His square face with its blunt features and somewhat blue chin had the massive look of a carving in bronze. Whatever the end he had in view, Silas Hickory was not the man to be lightly turned aside from it. He had a long bare upper lip, also rather blue, that betokened an obstinate will. His eyes were hard and direct under black brows of exceeding abundance. Undoubtedly a black beard should have completed his equipment, but this

was denied expression in spite of unceasing efforts to assert itself. It was said of him by village wags, behind his back, that Silas was covered with hair wherever he could not reach to shave. There was certainly no denying that his shaving was of a very rigorous and drastic description and was sometimes performed twice a day—a fact of which his step-sister and housekeeper, Mary Flight, strongly disapproved. She said that hairy men were the pick of the race and it was a pity that Silas did not make the best of himself. But no criticisms ever made any difference to Silas who continued doggedly to refuse to countenance the beard that thrust itself upon him. If Mary liked beards, why didn't she get a husband with one? He wasn't standing in her way.

Not that he regarded her as one of the marrying sort in the least! Somehow he never had, probably on account of her five years' seniority which had always given her a middle-aged status in his eyes. In any case she was well over forty now and looked it. Her stout comeliness allowed of no misunderstanding on that point. She had managed for Silas and Peter for the past twelve years, and seemed likely to do so for the rest of her life. It was an oddly-assorted household, and the curious part of it was that though they all passed as brothers and sister, there was no actual blood-relationship between any of them. Mary Flight was the step-daughter of Peter Garnet's mother who in her turn had become the step-mother of Silas Hickory. Silas and Peter were foster-brothers as well as step-brothers, the marriage between their respective parents having been accomplished as a pure matter of convenience some eighteen months after Silas's mother had died in giving him birth. Not much

was known of Silas's mother beyond the fact that she was of high birth and had married his father after a holiday spent in the West of England in face of the most strenuous opposition from her family. Of his father everyone knew everything. A great John Bull of a man had been Silas Hickory the elder, black-bearded, loud-voiced and assertive as a prize-fighter, jealous of his yeoman stock and yielding pride of place to none. His wife, very gentle and retiring, had made no very lasting impression upon anyone, and her memory had quickly died. Mrs. Garnet, Peter's mother, the wife of one of Silas Hickory's labourers, had been requisitioned for the nurture and care of his motherless babe, and had filled the gap with a cheery efficiency which on the death of her own husband a little later had induced Farmer Silas, as they called him over at Bode, to install her in his first wife's place as mistress of Staple Farm. The two boys and Mary had grown up together, and save for the fact that Silas had been given a sound Grammar School education whereas the other two children had received the usual tuition at the local Board School, there had been small difference in their general upbringing.

Yet, now that both the elder Hickory and his wife were gone and the three who had been children together lived on in the old home, there was between them a difference of which all who knew them were aware. Though they were universally regarded as belonging to the same family, Silas Hickory was never classed in the same category as Mary and Peter. They were plain country-folk, and Peter, though recognized as being something better than a mere farm-hand, was certainly something very much less than the foster-brother for whom he worked. Peter

belonged to the soil, and no other career than that of farming had ever presented itself to him. He was slow and very sure, like one of his own plodding cart-horses, laconic of speech yet not without a certain humour upon occasion, possessing for Silas a dumb devotion which seldom found expression but which was one of his most salient characteristics none the less.

It had always been the same, his attitude to Silas. Even as lads, it had existed in the form of a mute, instinctive deference which no adventures or pursuits shared in common had ever eradicated. And even Mary, who had mothered them both from infancy, manifested it in a modified degree. An invisible line was drawn between them which placed Silas apart. He was the master, and by a law as rigid as Court etiquette he was invariably treated as such. What was good enough for the two others was emphatically not good enough for Silas, and though he never made any stand on his own account Mary was strenuous in her observance of this ceremonial preferment.

Moreover, their friends were not his friends though to the outward eye they might appear to be. Silas had his own sittingroom at the Farm, and here he was quite undisturbed at all times, by Mary's unalterable decree. If she had company in the kitchen with which she deemed that he might not desire to mix, she brought his meal to him here herself. Like Peter, she never expressed her devotion in words, but her vigilance for his comfort had an eagle-like quality that never failed. Emphatically, Silas was not to be bothered by trivial things.

On ordinary occasions they lived and ate together, but Silas was never allowed to wait upon himself, still less

upon Mary. Peter might help her sometimes in the evenings if she were hard pressed, but Silas never. He was the king of that household, and he was kept rigidly within his royal limits, so far as Mary was concerned. If he elected to spend a night with a sick animal, that was a different matter, though even then Peter was usually hanging round until express command drove him away. But that was work within his province which any gentleman-farmer might undertake; but nothing of a menial nature, such as carrying a bucket of water or a scuttle of coal, was ever countenanced by Mary.

"Leave that for them whose work it is!" she would say, and Silas, realizing that to transgress her rules of etiquette gave her actual pain, was usually goodnatured enough to observe them, at least when her eye was upon him.

He was very fond of Mary, whose buxom presence was always full of good cheer. If he found her a little obvious and downright in her ways, he knew her for the soul of honesty and valued her accordingly. She did not profess to be intellectual, but she was an excellent housekeeper and her cooking left nothing to be desired. All that she did was well done.

Yet, though he knew that hot tea and a blazing fire awaited him on his return from the dripping fields on that chill November evening, Silas did not hasten his steps or display any eagerness to reach those physical comforts. His gait was thoughtful and his head bent.

Staple Farm stood in a hollow up a narrow lane that led off the old turnpike road to Bode. No traffic ever passed it except the farm-carts, for beyond it lay only fields and woods. But between the farm and the main

road another lane, grass-grown, scarcely more than a winding track between hedges, led up a steep slope, and it was near the entrance of this that he eventually found himself upon descending the hill.

A rough stile gave access to it from the sodden field he had just traversed, and this he crossed almost without checking his stride, then stood abruptly still, staring up through the darkness as though he listened for something.

There was no sound however, beyond the drip of the branches overhead and the faint tinkle of a hidden spring that ran down a ditch near by. Night had fallen, and it was one of inexpressible desolation.

He stood motionless for several seconds, Nero waiting, forlornly patient, at his heels. Then he heaved a sigh of which he was plainly unconscious and wheeled in the other direction.

"Yes, I wish it had been a brace, Nero," he said.

CHAPTER II

STAPLE FARM

MARY FLIGHT looked up at his entrance with a smile of welcome on her broad comely face. The fire was roaring up the open chimney, and a covered dish stood on an iron stand of Peter's contrivance before it.

"Come along in!" she said. "How late you are! I'm sure you couldn't have seen to shoot anything for the last half-hour."

"I've brought back a couple of rabbits," said Silas.

An old leatheren chair with wooden arms awaited him on one side of the fire, and a pair of carpet-slippers was placed conveniently near it in the glow. He moved forward and dropped down rather heavily.

"There now!" said Mary. "Take off your boots and be comfortable! I thought you'd have been in long ago. Just look at the wet on your coat! Take it off, and I'll go and get you another!"

She was on her feet with the words, pushing the stocking she was knitting into a corner of her chair; but Silas stopped her.

"No, Mary, leave me alone! I'm not wet through. I'll go and get a bath presently."

That was one of his idiosyncracies which Mary could never understand, though she saw to it that the water was

hot whenever he was likely to need it. She yielded the point of the coat and turned to the table instead.

"Well, I'll make the tea now. You'll be ready for it after messing about all this time in those muddy fields. Do take off your boots, Silas! You'll be ever so much more comfortable."

But Silas ignored the friendly admonition. "Better wait a few minutes for Peter," he said, stretching out his gaitered legs to the glow.

"And where's Peter?" said Mary, pausing teapot in hand.

Silas replied with his eyes on the fire. "I sent him round to Little Staple with a cock pheasant. He'll be in directly."

Mary's pause lengthened into a definite silence ere she turned and quietly set down the teapot.

When finally she spoke, her voice sounded a little strained. "I saw Miss Rosemary this afternoon. She was on her way back from the village and dropped in for a chat."

"Alone, was she?" said Silas.

He did not turn his head to ask the question. The red glow of the fire gave his features more than ever a look as of having been carved in bronze.

"Yes, she was alone," said Mary. "Miss Roberta was much too busy to leave home, and Miss Matilda is in bed."

"What's the matter with Miss Matilda?" said Silas.

Mary slightly shrugged her plump shoulders. "She always is a poor thing," she remarked not very sympathetically. "As often in bed as out of it, it seems to me."

Silas grunted acquiescence. "And what had Miss Rosemary got to say for herself?" he asked, after a moment.

"Oh, she was just as cheery as ever." Mary chuckled a little. "Ready to laugh at everything and nothing, the little rogue! She's getting very pretty, Silas, and actually eighteen next birthday. One can hardly believe it."

"Yes, she's growing up," said Silas.

"But that's just it," said Mary. "She never will grow up. She doesn't look a day more than fourteen. I can hardly believe she is."

"She was that when they came here," said Silas.

"Yes, and that's three years ago. It seems like yesterday, except that the old gentleman was with them, and Miss Roberta wasn't quite so thin as she is now. He was a fine old gentleman was old Colonel Wendholme."

"Yes," said Silas. "He kept Rosemary in order, which is more than anyone else has since he went on. The child is as wild as a hawk. There'll be trouble with her one of these days if they don't look out."

"Oh, but she's so warmhearted," pleaded Mary, "and simply devoted to her Aunt Bobby, as she calls her. Besides, Silas, she's so young. Why, she doesn't know good from evil yet."

"That's just it. Time she learnt!" said Silas. "Girls of eighteen ought to be beginning to have a little sense. Rosemary is like a colt that has never felt the lash. Miss Bobby is much too gentle with her."

"Oh, Silas, she's very strict sometimes," protested Mary. "Too much so, I almost think. Do you know, last August Bank Holiday when Rosemary broke away and went to the Fair at Bode with that young Hudson from Oxford her Aunt Bobby waited up for her and kept her locked in her room the whole day afterwards? Rosemary herself told me of it. She said she could have let

herself down from the window easily, but she didn't because she knew her Aunt Bobby was crying in the dairy, and she couldn't have faced that, she said."

Silas uttered a sound that was like a growl. "I should like the breaking in of that young woman," he said.

"Oh, but she's so tenderhearted!" pleaded Mary again. "Doesn't that show how tractable the child is? And anyhow, crying or not, her aunt never went near her except to take her bread and milk for her meals until the very last thing at night. Poor little Miss Rosemary didn't tell me what happened then. She only threw up her hands and said, 'My hat!' and added that she never slept a wink afterwards."

Silas growled again more emphatically. "That girl wants whipping," he said. "Why doesn't she turn to and lend a hand with the animals instead of always tearing about enjoying herself? I've a very strong suspicion that she's been riding Leader again lately. He's limping worse than he was."

"Good gracious, Silas! She wouldn't do a thing like that!" Mary gazed at him, round-eyed. "Where is Leader?"

"Up in the field behind the big barn, two fields off Little Staple. I know she has been on him since he's been turned out. Old Joe Brant saw her over a week ago, and I've been on the look-out for her ever since. But she dodges me, the young baggage!"

"Oh, Silas, don't call her that!" Mary exclaimed in horror. "There's no vice in her, that I'm sure there isn't. If you really know that she's been on Leader—though I can't believe she'd do such a thing—why don't

you step round and have a talk to her about it? I'm sure she would never do it again."

"She won't—if I catch her," said Silas grimly.

"Yes, but, Silas, if you'd only speak to her!" said Mary.

"She'd lie to me," said Silas.

"Oh, Silas!" Mary's voice held real pain.

"I tell you she'd lie," he repeated, stooping forward to throw a stick into the fire. "And I'm not going to risk hurting Miss Bobby over it. The only person that's going to be hurt is Rosemary,—and Miss Bobby won't know anything at all about it."

He thrust out his chin with the words, and Mary almost automatically shifted her ground.

"Oh, dear, dear, dear!" she said. "Why don't you move Leader to the field at the back here? He'd do just as well and be out of harm's way, and then she wouldn't have the temptation waiting for her, so to speak."

"I don't believe in removing temptation from people's paths," said Silas. "And look here, Mary! You're not to warn her. Understand? I shall catch her one of these days, so let the young imp do her worst—and take her gruel afterwards!"

Mary yielded the point, according to her invariable custom. "I won't say anything, of course," she said. "It's not my business. But do remember that she's not a baby nor yet a boy, Silas! She's a lady born."

"She's a mischievous little devil," said Silas with decision. "I'm not likely to forget that, anyhow."

The entrance of Peter at this juncture put a timely end to a discussion which Mary had begun to find somewhat distressing. She turned to him with relief on her homely face.

"Ah, now we can have tea! Are you very wet, Peter? Come along to the fire!"

She picked up the teapot again and made room for him to pass her, but he stopped and sat down at the table.

"I'm warm enough, but wanting a good feed badly. Got something nice?"

"Ham and eggs," said Mary. "And there are some sausage-rolls too. Come along, Nero! Here's a bone for you! Eat it in the corner, there's a good dog! Won't you get your boots off, Silas, before you begin?"

But Silas elected to turn his chair round to the table as he was. His face had a harsh look as though his thoughts were occupied with something very far removed from the good cheer that awaited him.

Mary served him first, that being one of the rules of the etiquette she had instituted, and he began to eat in silence.

They followed his lead for a space, then she and Peter began to exchange a few commonplace remarks that left the head of the house entirely to his own meditations. This also was etiquette as Mary had devised it. Silas talked or did not talk according to his inclination.

On the present occasion he was half-way through his meal before he uttered another word. Then abruptly he addressed Peter. "Did you see Miss Bobby when you left the pheasant?"

"Yes," said Peter, munching. "I did. She was up with Miss Matilda, but I waited while Miss Rosemary fetched her. She said I was to thank you very much for the bird, but she won't want a lift to-morrow as she's arranged to send her pigs over in Everett's cart, and he's going to sell them for her."

"What on earth is that for?" said Silas. "She'll have to pay the man commission on everything he sells and probably cartage too."

"Can't say," said Peter, still munching. "Suppose she knows her own business best. Anyhow, that's what she's going to do."

"Why isn't she going in herself?" demanded Silas.

Peter shrugged his shoulders and grinned. "Got Matilda in bed with a chill."

Silas made a violent movement of exasperation. "And what does Rosemary do? Can't she lend a hand?"

Peter's grin broadened. "Rosemary probably has other fish to fry," he said.

"She's but a child," said Mary extenuatingly.

Silas relapsed into heavy silence and drank his tea with the air of one who swallows with difficulty.

There followed a pause, then, as it became evident that Silas had nothing more to say, Mary and Peter resumed their commonplaces, talking together as though they were alone.

Silas was the first to finish, and pushed back his chair. "Do you mind if I go?" he said perfunctorily to Mary.

She opened her kindly eyes in surprise. "Of course not! But, Silas, you're not going out again—not now, all wet as you are?"

His look became dogged. Even in childhood he had never endured any dictation from Mary. "Yes, I am. I'm going up to Little Staple. It's absurd when I'm going in to Bode half-empty and taking Brant too that she should pay Everett to cart her stock."

He spoke with a certain savagery, as if Mary were the

aggressor, and she wisely forebore to make any further protest.

A cloud came over her usually contented face, but she merely said, "It seems a pity not to let folks go their own way if they want to."

To which Silas replied by turning with something more than his usual decision of movement and walking out of the room.

"Don't you worry yourself!" said Peter, as the door closed. "She isn't taking any, or I'm much mistaken."

Mary gave a sigh. "I do wish he'd just be happy at home," she said. "He's getting so restless and easily upset. And there's little Miss Rosemary makes a regular laughing-stock of him, and I can't stop her. It fairly worries me, Peter. We can keep order in our own sphere of life, but not beyond it."

"Oh, don't you fret!" said Peter goodnaturedly. "She'll laugh once too often, that kid. I'm not afraid of her getting the upper hand with Silas. What I am afraid of is——"

He broke off, as abruptly the door opened and Silas poked his head round it. "You might clean my gun for me, Peter," he said. "Come on, Nero!" And he was gone again with Nero eagerly scrabbling on the oak floor at his heels.

Mary waited till the sounds of their departure ended in the banging of a door. Then she spoke in a lowered voice.

"What are you afraid of, Peter?"

Peter finished his cup of tea and took his pipe before he answered. Then, with a frown on his goodlooking countenance he made reply.

"I'm afraid, Mary, that he's after something that won't bring him any good,—even if he gets it, which I doubt."

"I know what you mean," said Mary, with another sigh.

CHAPTER III

LITTLE STAPLE

IT was beginning to rain heavily as Silas went up the track on which he had stood listening about half-an-hour before. He had put on an oilskin mackintosh, and the drops pattered drearily on his shoulders as he trudged along the narrow way. The murmur of the spring in the ditch had become a definite chatter. The mud was thick and clinging, but he tramped through it without pause, the faithful Nero closely following. There was more than fatefulness about him now; there was fighting determination. It was very dark by this time, and he carried a hurricane-lamp that shone with a fitful gleaming upon the puddles as he went.

The track seemed to wind endlessly, though it was in reality barely half-a-mile from the Staple Farm lane that it widened out to a duck-pond on one side and an open space in front of a small garden on the other. Silas turned into this garden, admitting himself by a little white gate. A row of uneven flagstones led to a cottage, also white and thatched, smelling of wood-smoke. It was an ancient place, with lattice-windows from two of which on the ground floor a light shone through red blinds. He reached a whitewashed porch and set his lantern upon a seat at the side. Then he knocked with

his knuckles somewhat imperiously upon the stout wooden door.

For a moment or two there was no sound within, and then suddenly a merry childish voice began to sing a ditty with an impudent lilt.

“Hickory dickory dock!
Whose is that terrible knock?
Oh, don’t stay to rile us, but run away, Silas
Hickory dickory dock!”

The words were spoken with great directness close to the keyhole, and they ended in a laugh so gay and spontaneous that most people would have found it hard not to laugh also. Not so Silas Hickory! His face darkened as he listened, and ere the ditty was well over he was rattling the latch.

“Let me in, please!” he commanded. “I want to speak to Miss Roberta.”

Another burst of laughter greeted this announcement. The door showed no signs of yielding. The impudent voice chanted another verselet through the keyhole as soon as mirth permitted.

“Oh, we get so sickery
Of Hick-Hick-Hickory,
And we wish he’d go-o away.”

At this point Silas lost his temper and delivered a prolonged volley of such thundering knocks that the ribald vocalist could make no headway in the din.

His attack ended with somewhat disconcerting suddenness in the sudden swinging open of the door, a *coup*

which nearly precipitated him headlong upon the threshold.

A gay voice greeted him. "Hullo, landlord! Hold up—hold up! Where have you been entertaining yourself this evening?"

He found himself face to face with a laughing imp of a girl, blue-eyed, golden-haired, bewitchingly pretty, dressed in a white shirt and brown breeches with boots to the knee. Laughter quivered in every line of her. She looked like a saucy lad of fourteen.

Silas, ten inches above her head, looked down on her with complete disapproval. "I want to speak to your aunt," he said.

She stooped with careless grace to caress Nero. "*Ça va!*" she remarked. "But he can't always have what he wants, can he, Nero? Aunt Bobby is busy," she announced, standing up again. "But I'll give her a message if you like."

"Thanks. I don't," said Silas grimly. "I'll wait."

"I expect she'll be busy all night now," said the girl, making an impertinent grimace at him. "Will you take a seat on the mat?"

"I'll stand, thanks," said Silas.

Again laughter burst from her; it seemed impossible to keep it in. "Bronze statue of a ferocious cave-man masquerading in the fustian of a British farmer!" she observed to the oak rafters. "Price of raw material alone—five and threepence, clothes—shocking misfit, artistry—too atrocious to mention. Would make a good background to a prehistoric film—minus the clothes of course, which completely fail to disguise the violent and very unattractive temperament of the man!"

Silas spoke, with difficulty restraining himself. "I won't detain you, Miss Rosemary. Will you kindly mention to your aunt that I am here?"

She held up her hands in mock astonishment. "Kindly mention you are here! My good man, if I could only mention that you had gone again, I might be giving her an unexpected piece of good news. As to your arrival, she must be only too well aware of it. I suppose that as the house is your own, you are at liberty to knock it down whenever the fancy takes you. But after all, we do pay our rent regularly, don't we?"

It was Silas's opportunity and he seized it. "I don't think you personally ever do anything beyond getting up to mischief," he said.

She put out her tongue at him; then spoke compassionately. "Yes, I daresay a very limited intelligence might take that point of view, and clodhoppers seldom manage to develop anything more. Cave-men too are guided only by the most primitive instincts, so perhaps it would be unkind to expect too much. Ah! Your dignified entrance has had the unlooked-for effect of rousing the household. Guess who it is, Aunt Bobby!"

She turned to a dark corner behind her whence a winding oak staircase led steeply upwards, to meet a slight hurrying figure that swiftly reached the uneven floor and came running over the rough matting to join them.

"Mr. Hickory, I am so sorry you should have been kept waiting," the new-comer said.

She had a sweet clear voice, and her movements were quick and bird-like. In appearance she might have been the elder sister of the taunting imp in riding-breeches, so light a mark had the twenty years that divided them

made upon her. A little taller than Rosemary and exquisitely formed was Miss Roberta Wendholme. She had a soft gay laugh, but there was a decision about her straight blue eyes and delicate chin that gave undeniable force to her personality. Her hands were small and dainty, but firm in every gesture.

She gave Silas one of them with a smile of welcome. "And you have come up in all this horrible rain! Do come in to the fire! Rosemary, you should have asked him in."

"He came in without," laughed Rosemary. "And you'd better be very careful, Aunt Bobby, for he's feeling rather prehistoric."

"Foolish child!" said Aunt Bobby, turning to a half-open door on her left whence came the cosy glow of lamp-light and firelight combined. "Come in here, Mr. Hickory! How very kind of you to have sent us up another bird! It is such a treat, especially for my sister in her poor state of health."

She led the way into her little parlour with the words where a peat fire burned with a steadfast redness beneath a wide-mouthed chimney. There were a good many books on shelves along the walls and a few good oil-colours. An ancient oak dresser with some china stood at one end, and at the side of it a door led into the kitchen. There were rose-coloured curtains at the windows and rose cushions on the chairs. A leopard-skin rug covered the shabbiness of the settee that was drawn up to the fire. The whole effect was one of comfort oddly mingled with penury.

"Sit down!" said Aunt Bobby, pointing to the settee. Silas hesitated for a moment, for Rosemary was danc-

ing on her toes behind him softly humming her impromptu nursery rhyme; then with an air of determination he pulled off his wet mackintosh, dropped it on the back of a chair and complied.

"Afraid I'm rather muddy," he said.

"What does that matter?" said Aunt Bobby tranquilly.
"Everybody is now-a-days."

She sat in an old and rickety armchair, and Rosemary came and perched on the arm, her vivid face alight with mocking merriment.

"Dear Aunt Bobby!" she said, twining a warm arm round her as she sat. "You've given up the unequal contest, haven't you? The snow-boots have gone by the board and top-boots have taken their place. It'll be breeches too before the year is out."

Bobby lifted a slightly flushed face to the child's laughing eyes. "Rosemary darling," she said, "there is one rule which I think you have forgotten. Outdoor clothes are always changed as soon as we come in for the evening."

"Oh, but I'm going out again," said Rosemary, unabashed. "I've got to take Jess her supper. Yes, darling, I know I ought to have done it before, but I was busy, and then Peter Garnet came, and after that I forgot. She won't hurt, you know. I expect with all those puppies to look after she's forgotten too."

"Go and do it at once, dear!" said Bobby. "It's very unkind to keep her waiting."

"A few minutes more or less can't matter now," responded Rosemary. "By the way, Nero is in the hall. Shall I take him along to see her? He doesn't know he is

the happy father of five, does he? He was only a bridegroom last time he came."

"Go, dear!" said Bobby, gently patting her hand. "But leave Nero where he is!"

"Oh, there's plenty of time," protested Rosemary. "I want to hear what Mr. Hickory has come for this time I'm sure it's something to do with pigs. I can feel it in my bones."

She laughed across at Silas with eyes of roguish effrontery and swung a careless leg in his direction.

Silas said nothing with conspicuous determination. There was something about him suggestive of a colossal force strongly pent at the moment. He did not even look at Rosemary, but stared straight at the fire.

Bobby spoke, with firmness. "Rosemary dear, go now! Please don't let me have to speak again!"

Rosemary jumped lightly to her feet. She looked more than ever like a very winning young boy as she stood facing Silas,—daring him, it almost seemed.

"I went round to see Mary to-day," she observed. "She told me quite a lot about you, and all about your funny little ways when you were a child. She seems absolutely devoted to you. I can't think why you don't marry her. She'd make you a jolly suitable wife."

She shot the words at him with supreme impertinence. Silas stiffened at the sudden attack. She had pierced his armour at last, and he opened his mouth to reply. But before he could do so, Aunt Bobby swooped like an angry bird upon the offender.

"Rosemary," she said, "you annoy me very much! Please go at once!"

It was a very definite command. Rosemary whizzed

round on her heels to face her, and brought her hand to her forehead in a smart salute. Her eyes sparkled with wicked gaiety as she tramped to the door.

Reaching it, she threw Silas a look over her shoulder that challenged and disdained him in the same moment. Then she was gone, whistling with great emphasis the tune to which she had sung her ditty through the key-hole a few minutes earlier, breaking into song as she pulled the door behind her.

"Oh, don't stay to rile us, but run away, Silas
Hickory dickory dock."

CHAPTER IV

CONCERNING PIGS

A MARKED silence followed her departure, and when it had lasted several seconds Bobby got up and began with rather fluttering movements to put the fire together.

Silas got up also, his great figure towering above her.

"That's all right, Miss Roberta," he said. "Don't you get worried over nothing!"

She laid down the poker and straightened herself. There were tiny lines about her eyes and mouth which only showed when she was troubled.

"It's very nice of you to say that," she said. "But it isn't all right. The child gets more unruly and out of hand every day. It's no good my apologizing on her behalf, for she always does it again."

A faint smile showed through the grimness of Silas's face. "You haven't whipped her enough," he said.

"Oh, but I have!" protested Bobby, her mouth quivering a little. "I used to have a theory that if you kept a child in hand from the very earliest it would never get beyond you. And I have been very strict with her always. But—I seem to have failed somehow. I suppose it is the fashion for girls of the present day to behave like spoilt children."

"They are spoilt children, most of 'em," said Silas.

"And they ought to be treated as such." He spoke dogmatically. "You mustn't let her defy you, you know."

"I really don't know what to do," sighed the older generation. "Punishments never have any effect. I am afraid only responsibility will ever bring her wisdom. I suppose we were the same when we were young."

"Except that we grew up sooner," said Silas. "But you needn't talk about when you were young. You don't look more than five years older than she is."

She laughed, and again slightly coloured. Her fair skin was wont to betray her thus in moments of embarrassment. As a girl she had battled furiously against this habit which she had regarded as contemptible but which had very completely mastered her in earlier days none the less.

She turned aside and changed the subject quickly, as had been her invariable remedy in her effort to overcome it.

"Well, what about the pigs?" she said, and then, realizing her blunder, turned quite crimson and laughed. "Do forgive me! You'll think I have pigs on the brain."

He smiled openly, and in a moment his sombre countenance was completely transformed. There was something about Silas's smile which somehow did not seem to belong to his type. Mary always said that anyone could see he was a born gentleman when he smiled. Perhaps it was that smile of his, rare as it was, which had made Bobby regard him as a friend rather than a mere neighbour of the farmer class.

"No, I don't think you have pigs on the brain, Miss Roberta," he said, "but at the present moment, I have. I got your message from Peter, and I've come up to tell

you that there's no need for you to employ a man like Everett to sell them for you. I'll sell 'em myself with pleasure, if you'll trust me to that extent."

"How like you!" said Bobby. "Of course I would gladly trust them to you, but you are so kind that I don't like to be always taking advantage of it."

"Why not?" said Silas.

She faced him with absolute sincerity. "You won't take payment for it," she said, "and—I don't like taking things for which I can't pay."

"Not even from friends?" said Silas, his dark eyes freely meeting hers.

"Not from anyone," said Bobby firmly.

"Oh!" said Silas. "And—don't you ever give things to anyone yourself?"

"That is quite different," she said.

"And do they throw it back at you because you won't let 'em pay?" proceeded Silas with rather stolid persistence.

"That is different," she said again, countering him with his own weapon.

He abandoned the brief contest with startling abruptness. "Well, you can pay me if you like," he said. "I'll undertake to do you better than Everett will even then."

"But—but why should you?" said Bobby, disconcerted.

"Why shouldn't I?" said Silas, and again his smile was apparent. "You are my tenant here. It's all to my interest that you should make a success of things."

She shook her head. "Mr. Hickory, I am very sorry, but I don't think that is your real reason."

"But we're not talking about reasons, are we?" said

Silas. "We're talking about pigs, and who is going to sell 'em."

She laughed, and something that had been rather like distress vanished from her demeanour as she did so. "I'm afraid it's no good," she said. "It's all fixed up now."

"It can be unfixed," said Silas.

"No, it can't. I shouldn't like to upset Mr. Everett."

"Damn Everett!" said Silas. "I'd upset him every day of the week if I got the chance."

"How very vindictive!" said Bobby.

"Well, but you know the man is a sodden brute that's sure to swindle you if he can, so why give him the opportunity?" argued Silas, not without heat.

She made a small gesture of appeal. "Please don't be so severe! I must paddle my own canoe, you know. I am really not doing too badly on the whole."

"Women are all alike," said Silas.

"So are men," said Bobby with a funny little smile, "when they want something they can't get. That sounds ungrateful, I am afraid," she added apologetically, "but I've got to hold my own somehow. It isn't that I think my way is always the best; only I have got to take it, that's all."

"And make a mess of things!" said Silas.

She nodded. "And make a mess of things. Anyhow, I do come to you for advice about the pigs, even if I am pigheaded about selling them."

"You haven't done even that lately," said Silas.

"Because I haven't needed it just lately," said Bobby courageously.

"Is that the real reason?" said Silas.

She laughed, her gay laugh that was like Rosemary's, only sweeter. "But we're not talking about reasons, are we?" she said. "We're talking about pigs."

"And you won't accept my help over them?" said Silas.

"Not this time, thank you," she said.

"All right." Silas became determined again. "I shall keep an eye on them all the same and see that you're not swindled."

She raised her hands comically. "Oh, please don't! It will be more trouble than if you sold them for me yourself."

"Much more trouble," said Silas.

"Aren't you difficult?" she said with a sigh.

"I suppose I can do what I like," he said rather aggressively.

"Oh, of course!" she agreed. "I am sure you always do."

"I don't, then," said Silas. "There are lots of things I should like to do that I can't."

"That's life, isn't it?" said Bobby.

He turned upon her. "If you're going to tell me that I can't always have what I want, I'm going!" he said. "It'll be the third time that I've been told it in the last half-hour."

"Oh, what a shame!" laughed Bobby. "No wonder you are feeling aggrieved! No, I shouldn't dream of saying that to you, Mr. Hickory. I shouldn't dare in the first place."

"You—wouldn't dare?" he said, his voice suddenly sunk very low.

"I leave all the daring to Rosemary," she said lightly. "I am sure she was one of the brave people who said that

to you. And the other—let me see, the other—must have been Peter."

"It was," said Silas. "But you—Miss Roberta, surely you always say what you like!"

"No. I stop first, as a rule, and count the cost." She spoke with a quaint, half-pleading humour. "It really is safer, you know. One has less to regret in the long run."

"It will never cost you anything to say what you like to me," said Silas.

She threw him a little smile. "Thank you. That is kind. Now do you know I think I ought to run back to my sister as she has been alone nearly all day, and that is so depressing for an invalid. You will understand, won't you, and excuse me?"

"There's no excuse necessary," said Silas rather gloomily. "I always understand."

"I suppose I can't offer you anything?" she said. "You have had tea?"

"Yes, thanks. I'm sorry your sister is ill." He picked up his mackintosh and began to put it on. "I can't hope to see you again for a long time, then?"

"Oh, I expect so," said Bobby, with pleasant vagueness. "It was very good of you to come."

He faced her squarely. "When may I come again?"

A sudden burst of song from outside the window, which was not quite closed, startled them both.

"This year, next year, some time, never!" chanted a merry voice.

Bobby made a sharp movement and coloured again all over her fair face. Silas turned abruptly to the window and pulled up the blind. There came a peal of laughter

and the sound of retreating feet, leaving only the patter of the rain beating upon the panes.

Silas fastened the window, pulled down the blind and readjusted the curtain with care.

Then he turned round again to Miss Roberta. "Good-bye!" he said rather curtly.

"Please forgive her!" said Bobby, holding out a hand that seemed to plead. "She is very young and headstrong, but she has a very loving heart."

"It's none of my business," said Silas bluntly. "I don't care what she does or is so long as she keeps out of my way."

"I am afraid it is you who will have to keep out of hers," said Bobby, shaking her head.

"That," said Silas, his voice suddenly so quiet that it sounded ominous, "I shall never do." He let her hand go with the words. "Not, that is, so long as she remains anywhere near you. Good-bye! I'll see that Everett gets you a decent price for the pigs. Nothing else I can do?"

"Nothing, thank you," said Bobby. "Not even that, I hope, if it's a great nuisance."

"It won't be," said Silas, going out. "And I'll drop in and let you know about it. Good-bye!"

He was gone. She left him to let himself out and remained standing before the fire with an expression half-whimsical and half-sad on her delicate face.

There was no stopping him. His tactics were of the steamroller type that might be eluded for a time but not permanently checked. She had known for a long while that she was powerless in that respect. Sooner or later, Silas Hickory would hem her in and make his solemn bid

for the future. Quite in vain of course! She had no more intention of marrying him than he had of marrying Rosemary. But all the same she liked him, and his honest devotion touched her. Bobby was one of those who, being sensitive themselves, shrink almost morbidly from the prospect of inflicting pain. Perhaps this was the reason that her efforts at avoidance had not so far been conspicuously successful.

"I suppose I am not rude enough," she said with a sigh.
"If I could only behave like Rosemary——"

But at this thought she stiffened. Rosemary had behaved atrociously, even more so than usual. Her open rudeness to Silas was becoming intolerable. It must be checked somehow, and it was for her to check it.

She straightened herself with a little jerk of determination. If she could not check Silas, at least she would not be overridden by Rosemary! Child of her heart as she was, she must not—and would not—allow her to grow completely beyond her control. At Little Staple there was so much to do and to think of that perhaps she had not given sufficient attention to Rosemary of late, and so she had begun to get out of hand.

"And she used to be so docile," she said to herself with a sigh. "Well, well, I shall have to be firm."

Meantime, there was the invalid awaiting her ministrations upstairs and she really must not neglect her any longer. She gathered up her energies with a conscious effort and thrusting Silas from her mind, she went about her task.

CHAPTER V

MATILDA

SHE went quickly up the dark oak stairs, moving with the ready energy which Silas knew as one of her main characteristics. That energy of Bobby's was never allowed to flag. Rosemary always declared that she was never tired, but it would have been more accurate to have said that she was never idle. The whole burden of Little Staple Farm hung upon her shoulders, and she never showed any sign of flinching. When Silas had once asked her what would happen if she were ill, she had answered, "How absurd! Why, I never have time to be ill!"

It was not so, however, with her sister Matilda. Mary's compassionate description of her as "a poor thing" was a very appropriate one. Matilda was one of those, who though seldom seriously ill, are never really well. She was barely two years Bobby's senior, but her dependence upon the younger sister was as complete as if many generations separated them. Rosemary used to wonder sometimes rather scornfully if Aunt Matilda had ever been young enough to do anything for herself, for Bobby waited upon her hand and foot with unremitting devotion. She herself never attempted to join in the good work, but for this aloofness she was not to blame, nor was it surprising that lack of sympathy had been its direct

consequence. From her babyhood upwards Rosemary had always been given definitely to understand that she must never worry Aunt Matilda, and in the course of years she had arrived at the very natural conclusion that Aunt Matilda very greatly preferred her room to her company. It had never been a sore point with Rosemary. Aunt Bobby's affection was of so warm and sustaining a character that she had never felt the need of anything further. Of her grandfather, old Colonel Wendholme, she had stood actively in awe, but she had never loved him or pretended to mourn his death. For Matilda she had no respect of any kind, and the deference towards her instilled by Aunt Bobby was of a purely superficial nature. She adored Aunt Bobby, and in her very waywardness she was wont to spare her as much as possible. In her early childhood to be whipped by Aunt Bobby for some fault had always broken her, because even a mild chastisement from the one and only beloved one was agonizing. The same punishment from her grandfather produced nothing but furious resentment if not rebellion, but Bobby—Bobby suffered so intensely herself in inflicting pain that punishment from her was altogether too heartrending to be incurred lightly.

When she was only nine Rosemary had made a solemn vow in church that she would never, never hurt Aunt Bobby again in that respect, and somehow she had managed to keep her vow to the extent of evading any further corporal punishment until she was judged to be too big for it. But her high-spirited escapades were many and daring, and often in the midst of her pressing duties Bobby would utter a swift involuntary sigh over the growing responsibility that each year laid upon her. Rosemary with her

enchanting youth and beauty on the one hand—Matilda with her failing health and pathetic dependence on the other! But she was never seriously depressed about it. As she would have said again with brisk commonsense, there was no time for that.

Entering her sister's bedroom on that dark November evening, her step was as light as though the day's work were before her instead of nearly past.

"I am afraid I have been a very long time," she said. "You must have finished your tea long ago. I hope it was nice?"

"Oh, do take it away!" came the immediate fretful rejoinder. "You know how I hate to have the remains of a meal lying about in my room. I suppose it was Farmer Hickory again, was it? What did he want?"

It was Matilda's contemptuous habit always to refer to Silas in this way. Their landlord was the only subject upon which she and Rosemary thought alike.

Bobby came to the bedside and whisked the offending tea-tray from the table.

"He only came to see if he could be of any help in selling the pigs at Bode Market to-morrow," she said, "as he heard you were ill and that I couldn't get over myself."

Matilda made a scornful sound. She was lying among her pillows in a kind of elegant disorder. She too had once possessed beauty, of a more classical and less arresting type than that which was developing in Rosemary; but years of discontent and bitterness had completely marred its gracious contours. Her features remained refined and chiselled, but the fretful lines of forehead and

mouth had become too apparent for beauty to hold its own any longer. The years had scored her heavily, and she looked at least ten years older than Bobby.

Her night attire was of the daintiest description. The whole of Matilda's life, when she was not being ill, was devoted to the maintenance of her wardrobe. As she said, it was right that one of them should have the style and appearance of a lady, even though they were condemned to lead a life of squalor and penury on a farm in the wilds. She had a wonderful taste in dress; it was her one asset. And her clothes were always faultless in cut and condition. She had a regal bearing also, and she knew how to wear them.

Even in bed, her dainty shell-pink *négligée* struck a note of fastidious and not wholly incongruous refinement in the plain room with its simple furniture and threadbare carpet. She had sufficient personality to make her surroundings, and not herself, the incongruous part of the picture. The coarse sheets in which she lay somehow merely enhanced her rarity. Only the tragic lines of her face matched the sombre background.

"And what will be his excuse to-morrow?" she demanded languidly, reaching a delicate hand for a small mirror that stood on a table by her side.

"Probably the pigs," said Bobby with tranquillity.
"What would you like for supper?"

Matilda made a face into the glass she held. "Oh, really, Bobby," she said, "your mind like your body seems to feed on meals! Whenever I see you, you ask me something of the sort."

"My dear, it is no good my bringing you up some-

thing that you won't eat," said Bobby, unperturbed. "I have done that too often. Would you like some aspic jelly? I have made some for you if you care for it."

Matilda was pulling her hair into becoming waves on her forehead. "Oh, anything you like!" she said without transferring her attention. "Please give me the thermometer before you go! If I have a temperature, you will have to send for Bellamy. I'm not going to lie here and die of neglect."

"I shouldn't think you have a temperature to-night," observed Bobby. "Wouldn't you like me to do your hair for you?"

"No, thanks. You do it so badly. I've been looking a positive scarecrow all day, but I haven't had the strength to alter it." Matilda's voice took a plaintive note. "It's all very well for you," she said. "You don't know what it is to lie here hour after hour. I honestly believe you would never think of sending for the doctor until I was at death's door."

"Oh, I hope I should," said Bobby briskly. "But you haven't come to that yet, have you? Now let me just put this tray outside, and then I'll come back and make up a nice fire that you can sit by while I make your bed."

"I don't want my bed made to-night," said Matilda. "Come and sit by me and talk instead! It won't take you any longer."

Bobby looked a little doubtful on this point, but she had the wisdom not to dispute it. She opened the door and set down the tray on a slab outside, then came back and attended to the fire.

"Give me my powder-box and manicure set!" said Matilda.

Bobby brought them, and adjusted the lamp by the bedside for her sister's comfort. Then she sat down in a wicker-chair, and though she never betrayed any signs of fatigue there was something that indicated relief in the manner in which she sank into the worn cushions.

"Such a pity you don't sit down a little oftener!" said Matilda. "You are getting so scraggy. But you always were a restless creature."

"It seems to be my lot in life," said Bobby, with a smile.

"Do you remember how you used to fidget poor old Father?" said Matilda. "He always said you didn't know how to rest."

Bobby made no reply. She knew, as well as did Matilda, that she had been her father's favourite and the sole comfort of his last years.

"And Rosemary is just like you," went on Matilda, beginning to powder her nose. "Such a wild, harum-scarum thing! She whistles about the place like a boy. It's such a pity to encourage her, I think. But you always said I was to leave her to you, and so I do. I wish you joy of her, that's all."

"And she is a joy too!" said Bobby, with sudden warmth.

Matilda raised her eyebrows a little. "I'm glad you think so," she said briefly. "I think you've completely ruined her, that's all."

Once again Bobby said nothing. Matilda really did not try her patience very severely, since her opinion mattered so little. As Rosemary had been rebuked for saying, poor Aunt Matilda just buzzed on and no one ever took any notice of her.

Matilda shut her powder-box with a snap after a few

moments and looked up. "And so Farmer Hickory is going to sell your pigs for you, is he?" she said.

"No, dear," said Bobby. "I have got Mr. Everett down at Holtwood to take them over for me. He is calling for them early to-morrow."

"But you have to pay him, don't you?" said Matilda.

"Of course," said Bobby.

Matilda opened her eyes wide. "Then why on earth don't you let Hickory do it for love?"

"Because I would rather not," said Bobby.

Her sister began to laugh. "I really don't see why you shouldn't derive some benefit from his ridiculous infatuation. The man's quite daft—obviously; but I don't see why he shouldn't do something useful for once."

Bobby got up. "I don't like to take what I can never repay," she said. "Well, I am afraid I must go and see to the supper. You would like the aspic jelly, would you?"

Matilda's face became petulant again; "Oh, anything will always do for me!" she said. "I don't suppose I shall touch it. If there's any junket and cream, I don't mind trying that."

"Very well, dear." Bobby turned to the door. "Yes, there is some cream left. We saved it for you."

"Well, I shouldn't think that was any great sacrifice," remarked Matilda. "You must loathe the very sight of it working in the dairy from morning till night as you do. I'm sure I should."

The soft closing of the door was her only answer, and she took up her manicure-case with a sigh.

"Poor Bobby! She isn't as goodtempered as she used to be," was her comment. "She quite resented that little

joke about Farmer Hickory. But she can't—surely she can't—take him seriously!" The idea suddenly presented a disquieting aspect; she paused in her task with dilated eyes. Then: "Oh no, it's impossible!" she decided finally. "She couldn't lower herself to that extent even though she does run a farm!"

She began to trim her nails with fastidious care, and the subject dropped from her mind. Matilda Wendholme possessed the immense advantage of being able to concentrate her whole thought upon herself to the exclusion of all minor subjects practically at will. And no one could maintain that Bobby's drab existence could be a matter of especial importance to anyone for long. Ever since Bobby had elected to turn farmer and bury herself and the rest of the family at Little Staple, Matilda had ceased to take the faintest interest in her doings. She had deeply resented the step, though she had been quite incapable of suggesting any other means of eking out what otherwise could hardly have been described as a livelihood. On that point Bobby had been immovable, and Matilda had been obliged to yield. But it had remained a sore point ever since. She had never fully forgiven Bobby for making that determined stand, and though she had since more than vindicated her decision, the bitterness remained and Matilda's attitude of perpetual disapproval had never altered. Bobby had chosen a life of slavery and degradation, and she, Matilda refused to take any part in it. She had never washed a cup or boiled an egg since they had become inmates of Little Staple. It was Bobby who had brought them there, and therefore, as a natural consequence, it was Bobby's business to do the work. That she lived a life of comfort

at Bobby's expense she would never have admitted. She was one of the unlucky ones of the earth. Her health was poor and life had used her hardly. That she made her own clothes and occasionally arranged flowers on the parlour-table were matters for considerable self-satisfaction. Not many with her limited powers would have done as much. In fact, Matilda always marvelled at her own grit and energy when she rose from a week in bed. There was nothing to get up for, very little to live for. It was only out of consideration for Bobby, who never considered her, that she did not suffer herself to go under altogether. So she sometimes said.

CHAPTER VI

ROSEMARY

"AND do I still annoy you very much?" asked Rosemary.

She had discarded her riding-breeches and donned a short navy-blue skirt that while proclaiming her sex did not succeed in making her look any older. She smiled at Bobby audaciously as she joined her by the kitchen fire. There was something very sweet and childish about her as she paused, awaiting her welcome.

Bobby, who was busy frying eggs and bacon for their supper, did not turn her head.

"You might get the dish out of the oven," she said. "Take the cloth! It's very hot."

Rosemary complied with an assiduity that testified to her desire for favourable treatment. "You run along and wash!" she said. "I'll finish the eggs."

It was her invariable habit to try to coax Aunt Bobby into overlooking an offence by being especially helpful in domestic matters. On ordinary occasions she took small interest in them.

Bobby, however, refused to desert her post. "No, I'll finish them now," she said. "Go and make up the parlour fire, dear! I shall be in directly."

Rosemary turned to obey; then abruptly paused. The

endearing word had emboldened her. She suddenly sprang to Bobby's side and closely embraced her.

"Darling—darling Aunt Bobby!" she said.

Bobby did not resist her, but she made not the faintest response. She stood quite passive, enduring the warm kisses pressed upon her. "Run along now, Rosemary!" she said. "It is getting late."

"Won't you kiss me?" pleaded Rosemary, still holding her.

"Not now," said Bobby, with quiet decision.

"Why won't you?" urged the girl. "I haven't been horrid to you. You can't really mind how I treat a man like Silas Hickory who is always out of place whenever he comes here."

"I mind your behaving rudely to anyone," said Bobby, on the same decided note. "It doesn't matter who it is in the least."

"But you've got to be protected somehow," protested Rosemary. "If we all receive him with open arms, he'll come and take up his abode here for good."

"Now you are being ridiculous," said Bobby. "Please go and see to the parlour fire and try to behave sensibly!"

"You won't kiss me?" said Rosemary.

"No," said Bobby.

A gleam of mutiny shone unexpectedly in the girl's eyes. "I believe you're in a rage," she said. "You'd like to beat me. But I warn you, Aunt Bobby, I'm getting too old to be treated like a baby of three. What I did this evening, I did for you. And I shall do it again if I get the chance."

"Thank you for warning me," said Bobby with composure. "My only answer is that in behaving like a baby

of three, you lay yourself open to being treated like one. That is all I have to say to you on the subject."

She closed her lips with the words, and, having extricated herself from Rosemary's relaxed hold, bent resolutely over the frying-pan.

Rosemary stood and watched her for a second or two with smouldering resentment, then swung round and walked from the room with her head held high.

A faint sigh escaped Bobby as the door closed, but the bacon had begun to hiss and she gave no other sign of depression.

When a little later she entered the parlour with the dish in her hand, her face was quite serene and free from strain.

Rosemary was sitting before the fire with a book. She did not offer to fetch the plates, and Bobby went back for them herself.

"Come along!" she said then, as Rosemary did not move. "We'll have it while it's hot."

The girl looked up, the cloud still on her brow. "Aunt Bobby!" she said.

"My dear," said Bobby quietly, "we are not going to discuss anything more for the moment. When you are ready to admit, what you know to be the case, that you have done wrong, I will listen to you, but not before. Now come and have supper! Will you cut the bread?"

Rosemary got up. Her girlish face looked drawn and worried. "I'm not at all sure that I have done wrong," she said.

"Cut the bread, dear!" said Bobby.

She complied and sat down at the table. "What about Aunt Matilda?" she said, after a moment.

"I have taken her tray up," said Bobby.

Rosemary made a small sound that expressed self-depreciation. "I'd have done that. Why didn't I think?" she said.

"I had to go up," said Bobby.

"I'm sorry," said Rosemary.

Supper when the fastidious Matilda was not present was always a very brief affair notwithstanding Rosemary's very healthy appetite. It was especially so tonight, for they ate in almost unbroken silence. Bobby spoke once to inquire after Jess and her pups, but after receiving a satisfactory though preoccupied answer she said no more. Her brow remained completely unruffled, and there was nothing about her to indicate that her mind was not wholly at rest.

Not so Rosemary! She ate rapidly, almost as if she did not know what she was doing, and there was an impatient frown above her eyes. Once or twice she bolted a mouthful as though on the verge of impetuous speech, but each time she checked herself and the words remained unuttered.

When the meal was over, she pushed back her chair and got up as though finding relief in action.

"You go to Aunt Matilda! I'll see to things," she said.

Bobby went quietly from the room without remark.

In her absence Rosemary clattered the supper-things together promiscuously and cleared the table by armfuls, bearing everything into the kitchen where she began to wash up with fierce velocity. The crash of a broken plate soon interrupted her labours, however, and when Bobby descended a little later she came upon her lying half-across the kitchen-table in a storm of tears.

"My precious baby!" said Bobby, and gathered her to her heart where Rosemary wept for several seconds with a fierce abandonment.

Bobby finally drew her back into the parlour, and they sat on the old settee together while Rosemary gradually recovered.

"I'm so sorry about the plate," were her first words, as Bobby dried her tears with a tender hand.

"Never mind about the plate, darling!" said Aunt Bobby.

"I didn't do it on purpose," said Rosemary, assuming the task of drying her own tears with more vigour. "It wasn't because I was in a temper either. The beastly thing simply jumped out of my hand."

"I understand, darling," said Bobby.

The girl turned impulsively and wound coaxing arms about her. "Aunt Bobby, will you kiss me now?"

Bobby hesitated for a single instant, then, as though she had it not in her heart to do otherwise, she complied.

Rosemary nestled down against her shoulder caressingly. "Thank you, Aunt Bobby darling! That was very sweet of you—just like you, in fact. I know I've been a pig and I'm dreadfully sorry to have upset you. But I can't help it—I simply can't help it when that awful lantern-jawed man comes round here. You—you—I don't think you realize what he's after. Aunt Bobby, can't you—can't you keep him at arm's length?"

"My dear," said Aunt Bobby, "if you are referring to Mr. Hickory, he has never been a single inch nearer than that, so far as I know."

Rosemary writhed. "He will be—at this rate. I know it! I know the signs. He is one of those horrible bull-

dog creatures that keep coming on however hard one may try to shoo them away. And I don't think you do try very hard, Aunt Bobby. You—you are so dreadfully nice to everybody. And I'm sure that makes him worse. It's getting a positive nightmare with me."

"But what are you afraid of?" said Bobby.

The girl's arms tightened about her. "Afraid of his getting a hold on you," she whispered, "and—dragging you away from us whether you will or not. Oh, Aunt Bobby, you don't understand these people—these primitive sort of animal men that live on the land. They are just like their own carthorses. They plod on and on and on till they get there. That's what Silas Hickory is doing. That's what frightens me."

"My dear silly child!" said Bobby.

"It isn't silly," breathed Rosemary. "It's the very fact that you can call it so that shows what a big danger it is. You don't know what you're reckoning with. Every time—every time he comes here, he manages somehow to strengthen his position. Oh, it isn't fancy! Indeed it isn't! I know what he is after. Mary knows too. I've seen it in her face though she has never spoken of it. I used to think that it was screamingly funny that a man like that should dare to lift his eyes to you. But I don't now, Aunt Bobby. I don't now. I think it's somehow dreadful."

"My dear child!" Bobby said again. Over Rosemary's bowed head she was faintly smiling, though her smile had in it more of sadness than of mirth.

Rosemary went on in the same hushed, rather desperate voice. "I do my best to drive him away and he knows it. But you—when you reprove me in front of him—

apologize for me—" she writhed again—"you simply encourage him, and so he always comes again for more. He'll come again to-morrow. I know he will. He—he's rather like a tramp that sets his foot inside the door so that you can't shut it. Aunt Bobby, don't you think—oh, can't you see—that the time has come to try and shut the door? You are always so sweet to everybody, but you won't be able to keep on. You'll have to do it in the end. You'll simply have to shut him out soon."

"I don't see why," said Bobby quietly.

Something in her tone made Rosemary raise her head swiftly and gaze at her. "Aunt Bobby! Aunt Bobby!" she gasped. "You must see!"

Bobby checked her with a steady hand upon her arm. "Rosemary," she said, "listen to me! I have never wanted to discuss this subject with you, but for once I will. You have behaved very badly, but I know that your motive was not wholly bad, so I will not go into that any further except to tell you that there must be no more of it. I insist upon your treating Mr. Hickory from to-day forward as the gentleman that he is."

"Gentleman!" ejaculated Rosemary.

"Yes, gentleman!" Very emphatically Bobby repeated the word. "I am not speaking of birth or upbringing. I am simply speaking of the man himself. Silas Hickory is a gentleman, and as such he is always welcome wherever I have any voice in the matter. I have a great regard for him, and I am very pleased to reckon him as a friend as well as a neighbour. More than that of course he is not, and never can be. I have given him no reason whatever for thinking otherwise. But he is not to be insulted upon that account. He has always treated me with the utmost

courtesy, and I know him well enough to be certain that he will always do so. Now that, Rosemary, is all that I have to say upon the matter. And I hope very earnestly that I shall never have to re-open the subject of your behaviour towards him again. There is nothing in the situation that could ever warrant such rudeness as you have shown. If you are right in your rather wild surmise, then all the greater consideration should be shown him. But right or wrong, my child, there is only one thing for you to do, and that is to behave with courtesy and dignity to him as to everyone else who comes to this house. You too, Rosemary, are born to a certain estate, and do not degrade yourself and me by forgetting it!"

She ceased to speak, and Rosemary, who had more than once restrained herself with difficulty from interrupting, broke into vehement speech.

"I don't forget, Aunt Bobby! And it's to save you from being degraded that I do it. Not that it would matter one jot if I did forget! There's no reason that I can see for remembering. If we're going to be treated as equals by all the yokels of the country-side we may as well descend to their level at once, and treat them in the way they can best understand."

"Rosemary!" said Bobby, and there was deep pain in her voice.

Rosemary paused, gazing at her. "Oh, why—" she began, and then suddenly, quite inexplicably, her resistance collapsed. She laid her head down upon Bobby's shoulder. "Oh, all right!" she said. "All right! Don't look like that! You've won! I'll—" she choked a little and swallowed hard—"I'll be ever so nice to him to-morrow."

Bobby's hand came up and stroked her cheek. "Dear child, don't think I don't understand!" she said with a sigh.

Rosemary's arms were strained fast about her. "Aunt Bobby darling, don't—don't sigh like that! I'll be whatever you want to everyone. There! I promise. I'd do anything for you—anything. Nothing would be too hard. That's all right now, isn't it? You're not vexed or hurt or anything? Please, Aunt Bobby, say you're not! Do smile again!"

"Look up, darling!" said Bobby.

Rosemary hesitated a little, then very cautiously raised her head and took a glance at the beloved face.

"Thank goodness!" she said with relief. "I thought you were going to cry. I did really. But you're not, are you? You won't, will you? It simply tears my heart when you do."

She was looking straight into Bobby's eyes now with something very nearly approaching worship in her own.

Bobby took the fair head between her hands and looked back very fondly. All pain and vexation were put to flight. After a moment or two she bent forward and kissed the vivid, adoring face so like her own.

"Bless you, my sweet one!" she said.

CHAPTER VII

THE REAL REASON

ROSEMARY's prediction that her bugbear would come again on the morrow was fulfilled, but she herself was absent when he did so, having been considerably despatched to the Vicarage by Bobby with some eggs. Bobby supplied a good many of the surrounding houses with eggs. She had the gift, Rosemary said, of persuading her hens to lay when those of other people were on strike. If unremitting care and attention were the secret of her success, then she certainly earned it to the utmost. At five o'clock every morning she was always up and about, first lighting the kitchen-fire and making a cup of tea for herself and for Cox the cowman, then heating up food for the poultry while she swept and dusted the parlour and hall; then out to the pigs and the chickens, returning at seven to call Rosemary and put the kettle on for Matilda's early tea. At half-past-seven she and Rosemary breakfasted, though Matilda, even when in normal health, never came down before nine. Bobby had latterly, from motives of convenience, begun to take it up to her as soon as her own was finished, and though Matilda grumbled at the unearthly hour at which she was thus forced to eat it she suffered the arrangement. There were times when Bobby achieved results of this kind without any apparent effort, simply by quiet and unwavering insistence.

After the breakfast-things were cleared and washed up by herself and Rosemary, she went to the dairy to make the butter while Rosemary attended to the old cart-horse and her dog Jess who at the present time was occupied with a litter of puppies. Butter was another commodity which Bobby sold to her neighbours. She had but three cows, and such milk as was over went to Staple Farm in part payment of the rent. There were many ways in which Silas Hickory proved himself a friend and adviser worth having. He bought her calves and relieved her of many minor anxieties and difficulties. Only her pigs and poultry went to market, and it was usually under his guidance that these were sold. For Silas always had business at Bode Market when Bobby had to go. It was almost an understood thing, though she generally tried to hire Everett's cart for transport before he could persuade her to make use of his. Bobby was of a very independent nature, and, though never ungracious, she liked to stand upon her own feet. There was never any danger of the cross-grained Everett placing her under an obligation.

The dairy-work over, there was always work to be done in house or garden and the midday dinner to be cooked. On washing-days this was usually a cold meal, to Matilda's outspoken disgust. In the afternoon for an hour she superintended Rosemary's studies, which had been her most particular care since the death of her father had deprived the girl of a more leisured teacher. Rosemary was supposed to study alone for part of the morning, but since the advent of Jess's pups this arrangement had lapsed somewhat; but Bobby still insisted that the afternoon reading should continue. She was very strict on this point, and if Rosemary's attention ever waned, then

her chances of liberty for the rest of the day were small. If, on the other hand, she applied herself, she was free to roam where she would by three o'clock, and, to give her her due, she very often spent the time either in helping with the cows or in running errands for Bobby, who was then busy till tea-time with pigs and poultry.

On the present occasion she departed gladly to the Vicarage with the eggs, for the prospect of having to keep her impetuous promise of the previous evening to be ever so nice to the detested Silas was anything but an attractive one. And after all, funny old Mrs. Hudson, the Vicar's wife, was quite a dear even if a trifle prim. As for the Vicar, well, of course he was everybody's friend and generally to be found anywhere except at the Vicarage. Certainly it was much more fun when Percy was at home, even if he did get her into occasional hot water, as on the last Bank Holiday when he had taken her to Bode Fair on the back of his motor-cycle unknown to Aunt Bobby, bringing her back at eleven to meet the wrath of the gods. That had been Rosemary's last serious scrape. She usually had about three a year, she reflected, as she made her way nimbly between the puddles in the misty November sunshine, and she could hardly hope to keep the slate clean much longer. Last night had been a near thing. Aunt Bobby had very nearly assumed her magisterial authority against which there was no appeal. Only her timely surrender had saved the situation, and she had a strong feeling that even yet there were breakers ahead. It was really impossible to keep an even course. Life would become too deadly a thing without these ructions, even though they always ended in acute suffering. She did not

mean to be wicked and wayward, but, as Silas had said, she was like an untamed colt, and the necessity to run wild was sometimes too paramount to be resisted. It was no vice that urged her, merely the fact that she was young and hotblooded and had no other vent for the natural effervescence of her spirits. They simply boiled up within her and could not be contained. She had no amusements save those of her own devising, and perhaps she was hardly to be blamed that these were usually of the nature of escapades. If they brought punishment in their wake, well, that of course was unfortunate, but one must do something to relieve the monotony. To remain good in order to keep out of trouble seemed to Rosemary rather craven. Besides, she simply had to have her fling.

She had discarded the riding-breeches which she always wore in the farmyard in deference to Mrs. Hudson's primness, but she walked with a boyish swing nevertheless. No one could have seen her sunburnt healthy face with its startlingly blue eyes without realizing that she was essentially a child of the open air. And there was that in her erect carriage which proclaimed her a fearless horsewoman also, though it was largely due to the kindly veterinary-surgeon and riding-master at Bode that she had become one. Some of the best days that she had ever known had been spent in the saddle with old Roper as companion and mentor, and one of the sharpest punishments that Aunt Bobby could inflict was to refuse to allow her to avail herself of the offer of a free gallop over the moors with him. It was only now and then that Roper could spare the time, but he and Rosemary had been fast friends for years and he never forgot her when occasion

offered. He called her his prize-pupil and declared, in answer to Aunt Bobby's scruples, that her riding was more than sufficient payment for him. He was, in fact, very proud of her and, strange to say, he never found her hard to manage.

"Don't be afraid to give her her head sometimes!" he would say to Aunt Bobby. "Don't ride her too much on the curb, ma'am! Good breeding always tells in the long run. She'll never come to grief."

And though Aunt Bobby would shake her head and declare that he spoilt her, Rosemary knew that she did not despise old Roper's advice. He had a shrewd perception which he did not keep entirely for horses and cattle.

"If only Silas Hickory were more like him instead of trying to be a gentleman!" was Rosemary's thought. "I should simply die of shame if he dared to ask Aunt Bobby to marry him!"

Some unaccountable wave of telepathy must have wafted this thought to her at that particular moment, for it was just then, as the sun sank behind the elms of the churchyard and Rosemary turned in at the Vicarage gate, that Silas Hickory, looking peculiarly stubborn and rather ungainly, waylaid Bobby as she came from her chicken-runs to tell her that the pigs had fetched a good price and he had personally brought her the money from Everett.

"You can let him have a receipt any time," he said. "I thought you wouldn't mind my bringing it. He didn't want to come round, and I did."

Bobby paused, a little confused, a bucket in one hand and a can in the other. She was bareheaded, and the pale sunshine behind her turned her fair hair into a gleaming halo. Her face had a girlish, almost appealing look.

"It was very good of you to take the trouble," she said rather weakly.

He bent and took the utensils from her. "This is what I should always like to do for you," he told her bluntly; "carry your burdens."

"I am very glad the pigs sold well," said Bobby.

He turned towards the granary, and she paused in the yard and waited for him while he put her things away. When he joined her again, he was no longer openly awkward, but the stubbornness remained. Cox was milking the cows in an adjoining shed. He glanced in with an experienced eye as he passed.

"Such a lovely evening after the rain!" said Bobby, moving on. "It might almost be September."

Silas glanced about him. The farm-yard had a well-swept, orderly look. A white pigeon was sunning itself on the roof of the barn. A misty atmosphere of peace lay upon the whole scene.

"Are you fond of it?" said Silas.

"Very," said Bobby simply.

He looked at her. "But you never have any time to enjoy it."

"I just enjoy as I go along," she said.

She led the way from the farm-yard to the grassy space in front of the old house, and there she paused.

"Will you come in and have some tea?" she said.

He stood facing her, his burly frame massively outlined against the white of the farmhouse wall.

"I'll come if I shan't be in the way," he said.

She smiled faintly, a trifle wistfully. "You won't be in mine," she said. "Rosemary is out and Matilda is still upstairs."

A gleam of satisfaction shone in Silas's eyes at the news. "In that case I'll come, thank you very much," he said.

Bobby turned to the narrow flagged path that led to the porch. He followed her with a kind of heavy-footed persistence.

"You go and sit down in the parlour!" she said, glancing back as she entered. "I have just got to boil up the kettle in the kitchen."

"Can't we have tea in the kitchen?" said Silas. "I'm sure you wouldn't have it in the parlour if I weren't here."

She did not contradict him, merely went straight through to the kitchen; and again Silas followed with the level tread of one not easily turned aside.

The kettle was already singing over the fire. Bobby busied herself with laying the table for two and cutting thin bread and butter for Matilda.

He did not offer to help her. He simply stood and waited with a certain large patience until she could attend to him again. Bobby pursued her tasks with serene deftness. The presence of Silas did not embarrass her. Perhaps the man's absolute simplicity of purpose was a reassuring factor in her eyes.

She made the tea and prepared Matilda's tray exactly as if she had been alone. When that was done, she brought a home-made cake from the cupboard and set it on the table with the loaf and the farm butter.

"I shan't be a minute," she said, taking up the tray.

"I can wait," said Silas, holding open the door for her.

She passed out with a little smile and nod, and he turned back into the room.

It was much smaller than the kitchen at Staple Farm, and perhaps for that reason its spotless orderliness was more apparent. The rose curtains at the windows gave it a simple, old-world look. He remembered for the first time that Mary Flight's curtains were of heavy red serge. Also, Mary had never dreamed of cushions on the window-seats. In Bobby's kitchen there were window-cushions to match the curtains. There were flowers too on the dresser, some dahlias and Michaelmas daisies, arranged with a lightness of touch which honest Mary could never have attained. Mary's flowers were always placed in a handful in a Toby jug on the mantelpiece. There was a general atmosphere of cheeriness in Bobby's kitchen, and though it was low and oak-raftered it was light. He noticed that the windows were open. Mary seldom opened hers as she found that too much draught did not suit the fire and interfered with her cooking. The result was that the mustiness of centuries clung about the place. There was no mustiness here. Everything was sweet and fresh and dainty, like Bobby herself. The charm of her presence seemed to linger everywhere. It was a home without affectation or artistic conceits of any kind, and for that very reason it held a more direct and personal appeal for the man who stood and waited for his hostess's return. It did not speak to him of anyone but her.

He heard her light step in the room overhead and her clear voice talking while he took note of these things; then came the closing of the door and the sound of her feet on the stairs.

She entered, smiling. "Now we will have some tea.

Cox won't be in for his cup for half-an-hour yet. He likes it stewed."

She sat down at the end of the table and he took the chair on her right, facing the window and the garden—Bobby's garden where everything that was old-fashioned grew.

She gave him his tea without talking. Her serene silences were in tune with her surroundings, supremely natural and unaffected.

It was Silas who spoke first, and that with no idea of making conversation. The laws of convention meant nothing to him, and their relations had always been formal.

"Are you happy here?" he said.

The question came almost involuntarily, though it was one that he had often longed to ask. He was by no means sure that she would answer it, but he knew her well enough to be confident that she would not resent it.

She did not. She even laughed a little, as one who contemplates something rather humorous. Then she said, without looking at him, "I am quite content to live here, Mr. Hickory, if that is what you mean—unless you turn me out."

It was not what he had expected; somehow she seldom gave him that, though he imagined that he knew her so intimately that there was little more to know.

He made a sharp movement, for her reply pierced him, how deeply he did not for the moment know.

"Turn you out!" he said. "Do you think I am ever likely to do that?"

"I think you might," said Bobby.

He recovered himself. "You don't know me very well

if you think that," he said. "I would sooner think of turning out myself!"

"Thank you," said Bobby.

Her blue eyes rested upon him for an instant, and though their glance was absolutely kind, it seemed to convey some sort of warning; and Silas stirred again uneasily.

"Miss Roberta," he said, "you are quite wrong if you imagine that I could ever bear to see you leave this place. Why, if you never paid another quarter's rent, I'd still beg you to stay."

"What bad business!" murmured Bobby confidentially into her cup.

"That's my affair," said Silas bluntly.

She glanced at him again, and then turned her attention to cutting the cake.

As she handed it to him she spoke quietly, with a hint of repression. "I have always felt that I could be happy here. From the moment I first saw the place I felt that."

"Did you?" he said. He took some cake clumsily, his fingers not wholly steady. "I am very glad to hear you say it. I've sometimes wondered if with all this hard work, you mightn't get tired of it."

"Oh, I don't mind work," said Bobby. "In fact, I think work is the only way to be happy. Don't you?"

"No," said Silas rather grimly. "I don't."

She lifted her brows with a slightly quizzical expression and waited for him to continue.

He did so somewhat dogmatically. "There are all sorts of ways of being happy. But working isn't one of them—unless you get results."

"Oh yes, I think you're right there," said Bobby with

her cheery smile. "Working without results must be rather like being in prison."

"It is," said Silas gloomily.

"That almost sounds as if you have been there," said Bobby.

His dark eyes met hers. "I'm there now," he said.

Her smile lingered, but it held more of kindness than mirth. "I expect you can find a way out," she said.

"That's just it," said Silas. "Can I?"

Bobby drank her tea thoughtfully. "I think we can all get out of that sort of prison," she said, "if we work hard enough."

"I've done nothing but work all my life," said Silas. "It hasn't led me very far."

"I should think a great many people might think you very lucky," said Bobby.

He made a sound expressive of contemptuous disagreement, but the contempt was for himself, not for her. "Well, I suppose I am lucky from one point of view," he said, after a moment. "I'm making a living. But what's the good of that if it's never going to lead to anything worth having? Do you think winning prizes at Cattle Shows makes up the whole sum and aim of existence?"

"I should love to win prizes at Cattle Shows," said Bobby. "I was looking at that new shorthorn bull of yours only the other day. Isn't he a beauty? You ought to do great things with him."

"I daresay I shall," said Silas. "But what's the good of it? Peter will care much more than I shall."

"Oh, surely not?" protested Bobby. "You have always been so keen."

He threw back his head with an almost fierce gesture of repudiation. "I may have been keen once, before I knew anything better. But now—well, the taste has gone out of everything for me, and I can't somehow care whether I win or lose."

"What a pity!" said Bobby.

He drank his tea with indignant gulps. "I wouldn't care if it weren't so damn' foolish," he said. "I've always said to myself that I'd never suffer any woman butting into my scheme of things. If I ever took a wife, she would have to understand that and be content. But now," he glared at her with quite unconscious savagery, "I'm all upside down for the sake of a woman. And I want to kick myself for it."

"Oh, don't do that!" pleaded Bobby.

She stretched out her hand for his cup, but he did not pass it. Instead he pounced upon the hand and held it fast.

"You know what I mean!" he said almost accusingly. "You've known all along. It's your doing! I've seen pity in those great soft eyes of yours over and over again. You've been so decent to me all this time—just because you were sorry. That was it, wasn't it? Just—pity!"

"Oh, please!" said Bobby gently.

There was a ring on the hand he held, and he was driving it into her flesh. He looked down suddenly and realized it though she had given no sign. He relaxed his hold sharply and laid his face down upon the crushed fingers with something like a groan.

"I know you'd never be happy with a clodhopper like me," he said. "But—I want you so."

There was something piteous in the words—something of the appeal of a child realizing the unattainable for the first time. Bobby looked down upon the bowed black head, and her eyes filled with tears.

"Don't—please don't put it like that!" she said.

"How else could one put it?" He looked up at her and saw the tears. "Oh, don't cry for the love of heaven!" he said. "It's not your fault. I'll get through somehow. I'll get through." He spoke between his teeth. "I knew I hadn't a dog's chance. I've always known. But I couldn't stop myself. And even now—though I know you won't stoop to look at me—I can't do without the sight of you!"

"Oh, don't say that!" said Bobby. "Don't—ever—say that! I have no reason to look down on you. I am proud—as well as sorry—to know that you care for me like that."

"Proud!" said Silas. He stared at her. "You don't mean that! You are only saying it out of decency."

"I do mean it," said Bobby. "I think your love is a wonderful thing, and though I can't accept it, I do hope you will let me keep your friendship. For I value it—much more than you think."

He continued to gaze at her with a kind of searching wonder. "I do believe you are in earnest," he said.

"But of course I am!" said Bobby simply. "I do value your friendship, and I always have. I should be very, very sorry if this were to deprive me of it."

She slipped her hand gently free with the words, and though his face fell at her action he suffered it to go.

"That's so like you," he said after a moment. "So kind

to everyone! I've never seen anyone like you before. You can say the very hardest thing without hurting."

Bobby smiled with obvious relief. "I am so glad you are not hurt," she said. "I do hope you won't encourage yourself to think any more about it. Just put it behind you and be happy again!"

His face reflected her smile though somewhat wryly. "Would you be able to do that, I wonder?" he said.

She met his look with steady eyes. "I should certainly try," she said.

"Yes," he agreed, "you would try. I wonder if you would succeed. Somehow—I don't believe you would."

"Let me give you some more tea!" said Bobby.

He passed his cup and she filled it while he watched her.

"Then you don't consider I have taken a very great liberty?" he said at length.

"Certainly not," said Bobby.

There was a hint of pathos in his eyes as they dwelt upon her. "You know," he said abruptly, "I could offer you a better show than this. If you were the mistress of Staple Farm, you wouldn't have to slave as you do now. I'd make everything easy for you. You would live the life of a lady. No whitewashing of sheds or butter-making or anything of that kind!"

"I like doing those things!" said Bobby whimsically. "They appeal to me—much more than the life of a lady. I am really fond of little pigs."

"You would do exactly as much or as little as you felt inclined for," said Silas.

"But I shouldn't like to feel it didn't matter what I did," pointed out Bobby. "I admit that the work here at Little

Staple is hard, but it is at least necessary. One likes to feel that one is necessary."

"And what would happen if you were ill?" said Silas.

She laughed at that. "That is another advantage. One simply can't be ill."

"We are all human," he observed.

"Oh yes, I know," said Bobby. "That is what makes it so interesting. If one weren't fighting against odds, there'd be nothing to fight for, would there?"

"Then you don't want any help?" he said.

"I have never despised the help of a friend," said Bobby. "But, as I told you yesterday, I must stand on my own feet, even if I make a mess of things. And you know," she smiled again, "it may sound very conceited, but really they couldn't do without me here."

"I realize that," said Silas. "But I wouldn't let that stand in the way. I'd take 'em all in, if only you would come."

"Would you?" said Bobby, with obvious surprise.

"Of course I would! You know I would!" He spoke with force. "Do you suppose anything else in the world would matter so long as I had you? I'd make your sister comfortable, and I'd put up with Rosemary even. The only thing I wouldn't do would be to let you go on slaving for them as you're slaving now."

"Ah!" Bobby said with a comical shake of the head. "You would try to be a fairy godfather to us all. But I'm afraid it wouldn't answer—even if it were possible, which it isn't. Still, I do appreciate your generosity. You mustn't think I don't. No man could offer more. I just can't accept it, that's all."

"Why can't you?" said Silas.

The question seemed to burst from him almost involuntarily. He even looked for a moment as if he had not meant to utter it, and then abruptly he hardened himself to await her answer. For Bobby's deep flush had risen and spread like a signal of distress to her temples. She had not flushed like that before, when pleading for his friendship.

She did not speak for some seconds. But for his dogged silence she would hardly have spoken at all.

"I have told you some of the reasons," she said in a low voice.

"Yes," said Silas. "You don't like me well enough, for one. But you haven't told me that you never could."

"Oh, don't make me tell you that!" she said.

He went on somewhat ruthlessly. "And you think there would be ructions with your sister and Rosemary, for another. But let me tell you this, that isn't any reason at all. At least, it wouldn't deter me, nor, so far as I am concerned, would there be any ructions. Somehow, I don't believe it would deter you either if it were possible for you to like me well enough. Miss Roberta, I don't believe you've told me your real reason at all."

Bobby was smiling rather wanly. There was no recalling the flush that had betrayed her.

"But I have!" she protested. "There may be others as well, but——"

"And I am not to know them?" he said.

"The answer would have to be 'No' in any case," she said.

Silas pushed back his chair and got up. His black head was barely a foot from the rafters, and he looked gigantic.

"I think this is rather a child's game," he said. "You

either despise me or don't trust me. I don't know which."

"Neither," said Bobby quickly.

She looked up at him with almost unconscious pleading, the distressed flush still covering her fair face.

"Indeed neither!" she reiterated with emphasis. "I honour you, and I would trust you with everything I have."

"Not everything!" said Silas.

"Yes, everything." She repeated the word with a hint of his own obstinacy. "But—Mr. Hickory—it is not always possible to lay bare one's soul even to one's most intimate friends. And I—and I—" Sudden confusion overcame her and she ceased to speak.

Silas stood motionless, looking down at her. His attitude had changed during those last few moments. The half-fierce look of humiliation had gone from him. He was as a man who had suddenly found a footing on very difficult ground.

When he spoke, it was slowly and with a hint of mastery. "I will tell you one thing," he said. "You may have a perfect right to mark Private on your gate, but you can't prevent me looking over. I'll never come through it without your permission, but I've a very shrewd idea as to what is on the other side."

"Oh, don't!" Bobby said.

It was almost like a cry wrung from her, and with the utterance she bowed her face upon her hand as she sat.

Silas stooped over her on the instant in swift contrition. "Miss Roberta—Bobby—don't! I didn't mean it; or if I did, it wouldn't make any damn' difference! Listen to me! No, don't shiver! Be your own brave self! You needn't tell me a single thing about the other fellow if you don't

want to. I've always known he was there. You needn't mind my knowing. You've called me your friend, haven't you?"

His big hand was on her shoulder, stroking it with clumsy solicitude. All his assertiveness had melted into a tenderness that was like a warm glow surrounding her. Bobby sat very still within that kindly circle for several seconds. Then at last she raised her head and looked straight up at him.

"Silas," she said, "the gate marked Private leads to a sanctuary that belongs to others as well as to me. That—my friend—is why I can't open it to you. And please—of your charity—" she faintly smiled with the words—"don't look over! You won't find—the other fellow, as you call him, there."

"Where is he?" said Silas.

She shook her head. "I don't know."

"Is he ever coming back to you?" The hand on her shoulder had ceased to stroke; it pressed a little.

"I don't know," Bobby said again.

He bent a little nearer, looking hard into her upturned face. The colour had all died out of it now, leaving her with a sad, faded look very different from her usual cheerful serenity.

"Do you want him back?" said Silas.

She did not speak in answer. Only a long deep sigh came from her.

He stood up again and his hand fell. "All right, my dear," he said very steadily. "It's all right. You've called me your friend, and that's what I'm going to be."

She smiled with lips that quivered. "My dear friend!" she said under her breath.

He went to the window and stood there for a space while she sat passively waiting at the table.

When he came back his expression was absolutely normal. He sat down again in his chair.

"May I have some more tea?" he said. "And then we'll enter up the sale of the pigs in the accounts."

CHAPTER VIII

ORIGINAL SIN

As Bobby had anticipated, Rosemary was kept at the Vicarage for tea by good Mrs. Hudson who, though she could not always honestly approve of the child, was yet very genuinely fond of her. Everyone in the little village of Stapleton regarded her in the same light. She had a winning way with her.

The Vicar, a round-faced man with a jolly laugh, always had a ready welcome for her. Rosemary's escapades generally amused him, though he did his best not to let her know it.

He came in late for tea just as she was getting up to depart, and at once put her back into her chair with paternal insistence.

"No, no! You mustn't go yet. I'm coming your way myself to see old Mrs. Everett. We'll walk back together."

"Well, you mustn't be long," said Rosemary. "Aunt Bobby will start fussing if I'm out after dark, and I've got Jess to see to."

"It won't be dark yet," said the Vicar. "You just sit still while I have my tea! How is Aunt Bobby? All right?"

Rosemary opened her blue eyes wide. "Of course she's

all right! She's never anything else. Aunt Matilda is in bed though."

"What, again?" said the Vicar with a tragic gesture.
"What's the matter with her?"

Rosemary laughed hardheartedly. "Nothing so far as I know. She likes bed, I suppose."

"Rosemary, my dear!" remonstrated Mrs. Hudson.

Rosemary turned mocking eyes upon her. "Really, Mrs. Hudson, she does! She is always at her best in bed. Some people are, you know. I suppose it rests their tempers."

"Have you ever tried it?" asked the Vicar with a twinkle.

She met the thrust with complete good humour. "Yes, it's Aunt Bobby's invariable remedy for mine, but it doesn't always have the desired effect with me. I'm usually grumpy for days afterwards."

"I'll believe that when I see it," said the Vicar.

She nodded gaily. "You will one of these days. I know I'm going to kick over the traces again before long. When is Percy coming back?"

Mrs. Hudson's upper lip, always inclined to be long, lengthened perceptibly at the airy question. "I hope, my dear," she said, "that you will not turn his home-coming into an occasion for any wild doings which may vex your aunt. We expect him in about three weeks."

"Three weeks! Oh, I can't stay good till then," laughed Rosemary. "I only just escaped going off the deep end yesterday. I wish old Roper would come along and give me a run after the hounds."

"Can you not find something useful to occupy your mind, dear?" suggested the Vicar's wife. "It seems such

a pity to invent distractions when there is so much for all of us to do. Your dear aunt for example—how hard she works! Can you not give yourself up to helping her?"

Rosemary looked at her, and her eyes grew a shade darker. "I do what I can," she said briefly. "She won't let me do much."

"Could you not devote yourself to making your poor Aunt Matilda's life a little brighter?" went on worthy Mrs. Hudson who believed in preaching the cause of righteousness in season and out of season. "Think how much you might do for her!"

A curious darting light shone fitfully in Rosemary's intent eyes as she listened. "So I might!" she said musingly. "So I might!"

Mrs. Hudson pursued her theme. "Remember, dear child, it is only the idle hands which Satan can persuade to do mischief. And, alas, how often now-a-days the hands of youth are idle! But at least yours need never be that. You have your task waiting for you, and such a happy task! To bring sunshine into the life of an invalid! Could anything be more beautiful for a young girl to accomplish?"

"I don't know," said Rosemary. She looked suddenly across at the Vicar, and then without warning burst into a peal of laughter. "I only hope that when Satan does find some mischief for me to do, it'll be something really new," she said. "I'm tired of all the old scrapes; they're getting monotonous. People talk about original sin, but there's no such thing. It's all as stale and old as last year's rubbish-heap. You can put that in your sermon next Sunday."

Mrs. Hudson drew in her breath with a shocked sound.

The outburst both astonished and pained her. She had always regarded Rosemary as a tractable child, if somewhat impetuous.

The Vicar on the contrary gave no sign of perturbation. He set down his cup and took out his pocket-book.

"Thank you, Rosemary," he said, and began to write. "Anything else?"

Rosemary stretched her arms above her head with a rebellious gesture. "Oh, lots of things!" she said. "But it's no use talking. That's unoriginal too. I often wish I were just one of the animals. They do at least go to market and change hands, see different pastures before they die. And they can kick up their heels and run amuck without being rated for it too. Why, it isn't even wicked. An animal can't be wicked. And it can't be good either—which is better still. It can go to perdition its own way, and nobody cares."

"My dear," said Mrs. Hudson, "your remarks are almost profane, and I really cannot listen to them. George, what is that you are writing?"

The Vicar smiled without looking up. "Please don't interfere, Maria! There is nothing profane about it. It may not be wholly original, eh, Rosemary? But it's good of its kind."

"You find it amusing!" said Rosemary with sudden scorn.

He shook his head. "No, I don't. I find it interesting—very. You were tilting with the windmill of ignorance, my child, but I think you will have the sense to give it up before you break your lance."

"You don't understand!" said Rosemary hotly.

He looked up at her and his eyes were very kindly.

"Nobody understands, Rosemary," he said. "We've got to do without understanding. We've got to work in the dark, and remember, that's a bigger thing than doing a cushy job in broad daylight."

"It isn't!" declared Rosemary. "It's simply shutting off our reasoning powers and living like an animal. If we were never meant to use them, why have we got them? What's the good of being a human being at all?"

"Ah," the Vicar said, "Shall the thing formed say to Him Who formed it, Why hast Thou made me thus?" I am afraid it very often does, my child. But no answer has ever been given. We are made thus, and that's all there is to it."

"Well, I can't see the good of it," said Rosemary. "I call it a silly world. All the jolly things are wrong and all the virtuous ones are beastly." She jumped to her feet. "I'm going home."

"All right. I'm coming," said the Vicar. "You'd better wait for me. It'll keep you out of mischief for one more day."

She laughed and yielded. "But I'm not idle really," she said. "I work quite hard. Ask Aunt Bobby if I don't! It's only—only that I never get any legitimate play. That's why I get so mad."

The Vicar gulped his tea and got up. "Rosemary," he said, and his jolly face was grave, "you're quite right. Your life is humdrum, and all you do may seem to you quite futile. But—I have just one thing to say. It is duty; and only by doing your duty can you fit yourself for the wider life that you crave for. It will come to you some day, and if you're not ready for it,—well, you'll fail."

Rosemary's eager eyes searched his. "How do you know it will come?" she asked breathlessly. "You can't really know."

He put his hand on her shoulder. "I do know, child," he said, "But don't let it catch you unawares! And above all, don't try to force the gates! Or there may come a time when you will say, 'O God, let me go back! I never knew how happy I was.' And the gates will be shut behind you, and there will be no return."

Rosemary's eyes were wide and dark. She looked like a child gazing upon some wonderful scene never beheld before.

Mrs. Hudson had taken up her knitting and was plying her needles with pursed lips. Her silence was not sympathetic, and after a brief pause this fact seemed to reach Rosemary's consciousness; for she turned and looked down at her. Her own expression flashed from grave to gay in a moment, and she uttered a merry reckless laugh.

"Now I've swallowed my medicine without any jam, so let's go!" she said. "Good-bye, Mrs. Hudson! I'll be a better girl next time. Thank you so much for having me to tea." She bent and flung impetuous arms round the rather unbending neck of the Vicar's wife. "You'll have me again, won't you? I'm sorry if I've been profane. It's all the Vicar's fault. I never am when he isn't here."

It was impossible to remain unsympathetic. Mrs. Hudson tried and failed.

"Ah, Rosemary, my dear," she said, yielding to the warm embrace, "you know you may come as often as you like. You will be older and wiser some day."

"Heaven forbid!" said Rosemary; and then in haste,

"No, I didn't mean that. That's profane too, isn't it? I meant Excelsior, or something like that. You know what I meant, don't you?" appealing to the Vicar.

He laughed tolerantly. "Yes, I know what you meant," he said. "Come along, scaramouche! We had better be moving."

Mrs. Hudson detained Rosemary and kissed her again. "Let Excelsior be your motto, dear child!" she said.

"Right ho!" said Rosemary.

CHAPTER IX

MARY

THE Vicar preached upon original sin on the following Sunday morning, being the Sunday before Advent, and Mary Flight said that it was the best sermon she had ever listened to. It was so full of kindness and human sympathy, though, as she also said, he was the last person in the world that one would credit with any tendencies to evil.

"He's probably the same as the rest of us," said Peter. "Only he's finished sowing his wild oats, that's all."

"Oh, I wouldn't put it like that," said Mary whose reverence for the cloth was of the same quality as her regard for Silas's rank. "I should say that he was just being broad-minded and understanding. I could see that little Miss Rosemary was deeply interested. She was listening with all her ears."

"She doesn't often," said Peter.

"It isn't every subject that appeals to a child like that," said Mary.

Silas put in a dry remark. "P'raps she thought she'd learn some new sin that she'd never heard of before."

Mary shook her head in remonstrance. "Now, now, Silas! You're not quite fair to the child, never have been. Good gracious me, I should think Rosemary knows as much about sin as that old china dog on the shelf."

"She's got as much inside her ready made as most of us, I'll be bound," said Peter judicially. "But she's none the worse for that. She's only human."

"I know," said Mary, brightening. "That's just it, Peter. She is human, and so engaging with it all. I do believe she gets prettier every day. And if young Mr. Percy Hudson manages not to fall in love with her these holidays, well, he's something less than human, that's all."

Silas scraped back his chair on the floor and reached for the matches. "I don't agree with you, Mary," he said. "She's much too raw and undeveloped, too like a boy herself, to attract any deep feelings in anyone. Young Percy Hudson wouldn't be such a fool."

Mary's face fell again. To be in open disagreement with Silas was a state of affairs which had always appeared to her unseemly. Nevertheless, in defence of her absent favourite, she sought to hold her own.

"She's growing up, you know, Silas," she pleaded. "And she's getting really beautiful. I'm not the only one as thinks so. There's no one in the least bit like her hereabouts, and the young men are bound to take notice. I'm sure I hope it will be Mr. Percy, for he's the only gentleman she knows."

She looked at Silas deprecatingly with the words, as if she expected to be crushed the next moment under the heel of his contempt. But something in what she said seemed to strike him as reasonable, for after lighting his pipe he leaned back in his chair in silence.

It was Peter who took up the discussion. He was usually on Mary's side.

"Yes, I see what you mean," he said. "She is rather a rare specimen, is Miss Rosemary. Of course she's the

image of Miss Roberta. They might have come out of the same mould, only Miss Roberta has got a bit set with time, and Miss Rosemary is still plastic."

Silas took his pipe out of his mouth, and Mary spoke rather hastily, her tone slightly propitiatory.

"Oh, I shouldn't put it quite like that, Peter. What you mean is that Miss Rosemary now must be very like what Miss Roberta was as a girl. But it's only a family resemblance really. They are not much alike in character."

"I'm not so sure," said Peter, who was not averse to an argument with Mary when Silas was taking no part. "I should say that when Miss Bobby was Rosemary's age she was exactly the same, just wild and merry and taking; in fact, I'd say she might even have been more so. It's time that has changed her,—time and adversity. She's sobered down now—same as we all do. But you may take it from me, she wasn't always sober—not with those eyes. Why, I shouldn't wonder but what even she may have sown a wild oat or two in her time."

Peter began to chuckle at his own logical conclusions, but the sudden smart rapping of the tin match-box on the table checked him.

"Peter," said Slias briefly and sternly, "you're talking bunkum. Shut up!"

Both Peter and Mary looked startled. It was not often that the master of the house thus expressed himself.

Peter was the first to recover. "Why, what's the matter?" he said. "They do, you know—they do sow their wild oats—even the gentry sometimes. Not Miss Matilda; I wouldn't say that she's ever done much in that line. She's a bit too vain and finicky to let herself go very

far. But Miss Roberta,—well, anyone can see she's been one of the lively ones. I wouldn't put her down as too old for an occasional spree even now if it came her way."

"Then you're a damn' fool!" said Silas.

"Silas!" gasped Mary.

Peter said nothing. He merely looked very hard at Silas and waited.

Silas waited also, his eyes under their beetling brows alight with a dangerous glow. But as Peter remained silent, this gradually died down.

"No," he said. "I'm wrong. I'm sorry, Peter. But you'll be good enough not to speak lightly of Miss Roberta. She is a woman whom neither you nor I are fit to speak of at all."

He got up with the words and turned to the door. Mary and Peter watched him go in unbroken silence.

Then Mary rose to clear the table. "He's very touchy these days," she said sadly.

"Durned unreasonable, I call it," growled Peter. "I was only joking. He ought to have seen that."

"He did see it," said Mary. "But he won't listen to a joke of that kind. It's my belief, Peter, that he's been to her and offered himself and she's sent him away."

"Oh, rot!" said Peter. "He can't have got that far yet. Why, they've never been out walking together even!"

"And I don't think they will," said Mary. "They're not like that, Peter. They'd do their love-making on the quiet, like gentle-folks."

"I don't believe it," said Peter stoutly. "He'll never propose to her. She won't let him. She isn't taking any, I tell you, neither she nor Miss Rosemary. He's a fool if he doesn't see it; but I think he does."

"I think he does too," said Mary. "But he won't accept it. And why should he, after all? He comes of a good stock. There's blue blood in his veins." She spoke with pride. "His mother was a Thorgrave, and everybody for miles round knows what his father was. I'm sure any woman—any woman—ought to be honoured."

She spoke with such feeling that the tears rose in her eyes. Peter, looking up, saw them. He patted her arm with a clumsy hand.

"Don't you fret, old Mary!" he said. "You can't do anything. He'll just have to go his own way."

Mary turned her face aside. It was not often that she was betrayed into any show of emotion.

"Well, I will do something one of these days," she said. "I'll tell her how high-born he is. And p'raps then she'll give him his proper place."

"But you don't want her to marry him," Peter pointed out. "I think it would be a dashed nuisance myself. I shouldn't butt in if I were you. Let things take their course!"

Mary paused to consider, and brushed her eyes with the back of her hand. "But he ought to marry," she argued. "Think of the old name dying out! Think of——"

"Do you suppose she'd ever give him children?" said Peter bluntly. "I don't know how old she is, but she's no chicken. Why, look at Miss Rosemary!"

"Yes, but she may have been only a child herself when Rosemary was born," objected honest Mary. "It doesn't follow, does it, that——"

"She may have been," said Peter. "But—well, I don't much think she was. Do you?"

"Peter!" Mary went back a step in shocked astonishment. "What ever are you saying? Why, she—she—little Rosemary is the child of their dead brother! Didn't you know? Didn't I ever tell you?"

"You may have told me," said Peter, rising to knock out his pipe. "But I don't know that I believed it. You always take everything you hear for gospel. I don't."

"Goodness gracious unto me!" said poor Mary, gasping. "Don't you ever let Silas hear you say that! Why, he'd—he'd—I don't know what he'd do."

"I daresay he would," said Peter with grimness. "But he's got a very shrewd suspicion on that point himself, or I'm a Dutchman. You needn't be upset about it. It's not going to make any difference one way or the other. But I wouldn't try and teach Miss Roberta anything she doesn't know about Silas if I were you. Just you leave it alone, and it won't come to anything."

"Oh, but you can't be right!" protested Mary. "She's a lady born. She'd never do such."

"That's all you know about 'em," said Peter. "We're all of us human, as we said before. But if she's a mind to turn down Silas, for the love of heaven let her! We don't want other people's rubbish dumped down on our muck-heap."

"Peter!" Mary spoke with her hand to her side. "You've made me feel quite bad. I'm sure there's nothing in it. I'm sure it isn't true. What ever makes you think them things I don't know. But all men have got dirty minds, and I suppose you're no exception—though I've sometimes thought you were. Now will you please stop talking any more nastiness to me, for I've no use for it!"

The remonstrance was not without dignity, and it had its effect upon Peter. He looked rebuked.

"Well, I didn't mean any offence," he said. "If you and Silas choose to stick up for someone who doesn't deserve it, well, it's no affair of mine. Everybody's got a right to his own opinion, so we'll agree to differ."

He sat down before the fire and began to fill his pipe again. Mary continued her interrupted task of clearing the table with a very furrowed brow, finally withdrawing to the scullery and shutting the door. It was not often that she did this.

Peter smoked out this second pipe before at length he went in search of her. He found her to his amazement nearly blinded with crying, feverishly scouring an already spotless sink the while her tears dripped into it.

"Oh, goodness, woman!" said Peter. "What on earth's the matter now?"

Mary could not tell him. She could only continue her desperate efforts until he forcibly deprived her of the sink-brush and himself dried her shaking hands on the roller-towel behind the door.

"You silly old thing!" he said. "Why, I've never seen you cry like this since you were fifteen and the yard-dog bit you because I'd been teasing him. Oh, dry your eyes and be sensible, do! What's it matter if Silas does make a fool of himself for once? The world won't stop!"

"I know—I know!" sobbed Mary. "I'm very stupid. But I've always so wanted him to be happy. I'm that fond of him. And I don't see how he ever can be now."

"Oh, stop it, woman!" said Peter. He put his arm round her shoulders in a rough caress. "He won't come

to any harm. Leave him alone to manage his own affairs! He'll be all right."

Mary choked back a sob. "And Miss Roberta too! I've always loved Miss Roberta. I'd even thought that maybe I'd stay and serve her if she were to marry Silas."

"What?" said Peter. He wheeled her round to look at her. "And where'd I be, I'd like to know?"

"I thought p'raps you'd stay too," said Mary, feeling in her apron-pocket for her handkerchief.

"Oh, did you?" said Peter. "Well, you were wrong for once. I wouldn't. And I wouldn't let you either. So now you know."

He spoke with a force with which Mary was not familiar. She opened her swollen eyes a little. "You wouldn't let me! But why ever not?"

Peter growled something which he had too much respect for his companion to say aloud. For some reason not quite clear to himself he was angry.

"Well, I wouldn't, so that's that!" he said. "Now stop this nonsense and come and sit by the fire! I don't know now what you've got to cry about."

Mary dried her eyes obediently. "It's just that we've all been so happy together," she said, "and I don't want ever to be any different. It's been like a cloud hanging over me all this time—the fear of losing Silas."

"Oh, stop it!" said Peter. "Why, damn it, girl, you've got me, haven't you? How many more do you want?"

Something in his rough voice pierced her. She turned and slipped her arm round his neck.

"Yes, I've got you, dear Peter," she said tremulously. "Thank God for that!"

"Oh, don't be so durned foolish!" said Peter.

Nevertheless, he bestowed a brief kiss somewhere near her ear to soften the remark, and Mary remembered it later with a little wonder. The last time he had kissed her had been when she was a girl of fifteen and had wept because the yard-dog had bitten her instead of Peter who had been teasing him.

CHAPTER X

THE DISCOVERY

IT was growing dusk as Silas went forth into his rick-yard, and there was a chill in the air which might turn to frost in the early morning. He moved slowly, with heavy feet. He was vexed with himself for having lost his temper with Peter who, he fully realized, had had no intention of being offensive. What he had said had been outrageous of course and not to be tolerated for a moment, but only a fool would have tackled the matter as he had. They were probably laughing at him now, Peter and Mary, calling him all those facetious names which are usually bestowed upon a man in love. He clenched his hands at the thought. Wasn't it enough to suffer hideously, as he was suffering, without being laughed at?

It was five days since he had seen her, except for just one glimpse that morning in church of her pure face outlined against the old stone pillar by which she always sat. For five long days he had resolutely starved himself of the sight of her, and during that time he had hardly slept at all. Night after night he had lain staring into the dark with her image before him, ineradicable, almost as if seared upon his brain.

He had said that he would be her friend, but he had not been able to bring himself even to attempt to play the rôle. He wanted her so desperately, so unspeakably, for

his own. The thought of that other man who had won her heart and left her was torture to him. It set him on fire. He could not cope with it.

There was another thought behind which was even more intolerable. This was a spectre that came to him only in the night watches. By day he had the strength of will to fling it from him. But at night, like a poisonous serpent it crept upon him, wound its foul coils about him, held him in agonized helplessness. That gate marked Private through which he might not pass, what was it that lay beyond? Who was it that sheltered there? Over and over again he turned from the problem, only to be faced with it from another angle. Why had she cared so terribly when he had suggested the possibility of discovering the truth? If she were not concerned with it, why should she mind? She had said that he would not find the other man behind that gate, but was that literally the truth? His soul revolted at the doubt, but was it wholly without justification. Why had she been so urgent that he should not seek to know?

And then would come the vision of her, as he had seen it that morning—pure, steadfast, yet withal so sweetly human, and he would break free, casting the evil thing away. Could anyone with eyes like hers have any guilty secret to hide? It was monstrous, incredible, the evil phantom of his own diseased imagination. If he could only sleep, he would be able to trample it underfoot for good and all.

But sleep would not come to him. It eluded him always, often at the last moment when blessed unconsciousness seemed to be almost at hand. At such times it was not the vision of Bobby that brought him back; but that

of Rosemary with her vivid laughing beauty, seeming to taunt him, seeming to block the way. There were times when he almost hated her, times when he felt that he could have seized her between his hands and hurled her from his path. But always she eluded him, escaping as it were by a hair's breadth, and always she came again just out of reach to mock his fever.

And now he had seen them both again, Roberta and Rosemary, side by side in church, and it seemed to him that the fever had leapt well-nigh to madness. He could not have rested indoors even had those few ill-advised remarks of Peter's not driven him forth. What the devil did Peter mean by his insinuations? Whose vile tongue had first dared to link slander with Miss Roberta's name? But no! Peter had not given voice to slander in his hearing. He had only spoken lightly of the woman whom Silas worshipped. Possibly he had been over-ready to translate those careless remarks into calumny—such calumny as Peter had never dreamed of uttering. In any case he had been a fool to take him seriously, and had made a laughing-stock of himself to no purpose.

He dug his heel into the ground as he reached the gate that led from the rickyard into the lane. Yes, he was a fool—a fool. All the sense he had ever had seemed to have gone under during the past few days, swamped by this obsession, this mad longing for the unattainable. None but a fool would have gone to church that morning and risked awaking this fiery torment that was like an unslakable thirst within him. It had been like a drain of moisture to parched lips, renewing the anguish a thousand-fold, turning that which had been just endurable into a nightmare of pain.

He tramped through the gate and shut it behind him. Then he stood still in the lane, in the mist-laden quiet of the falling night, and took himself to task. "I've got to do something," he said. "I can't stand much more of this."

A faint, throbbing sound came to him through the stillness, but he did not heed it. His misery was too acute to be penetrated by outward things. Had he stood in a raging storm just then, he would hardly have been aware of it.

Yet something must have reached him, for after the passage of many heavy seconds he turned to walk down the lane. Nero had followed him out and accompanied him closely along the narrow way; but he had no thought for Nero. Scarcely did he know that he was moving in the direction of Little Staple. He might have been walking through one of those endless mazes of trouble in which his spirit wandered throughout the night.

He came to the junction of the lanes, and here something made him pause. Then with a sudden pang of bitter self-contempt he awoke to his surroundings. What was the good of going to her? Had he not suffered enough?

With an almost violent movement he swung aside to the stile that led into his fields and crossed it, turning his back upon the track that would have led him to her.

Drearly he trudged up the hill through the wet grass, past the big barn where the bulk of his winter fodder was stored, on to the open down behind Little Staple, above the field where Bobby kept her cows.

Nearing the summit of the hill, there came again to him that throbbing sound which he had not heeded, and

then suddenly through the quiet, clear as a bell, came a girl's voice.

"Steady, Leader! Steady, old fellow! You mustn't have a swollen hock in the morning, or there'll be trouble. Come along, old Hoss! One more straight gallop and good night!"

Silas stopped as if a thunderbolt had arrested him. "Damnation!" he said.

All the blood in his body seemed to go to his head. Everything about him went red. In that moment an anger that amounted almost to a lust for murder took possession of him. He quivered all over with the fury of it, quivered and waited like an animal straining on the leash.

The throbbing sound had resolved itself into the definite thudding of hoofs. There was a flat stretch along the top of the hill, and a horse was cantering over it towards him. He knew the tread of those hoofs. It was his own horse, Leader, who had gone lame and been turned out to grass some weeks before. He had had his suspicions for a long time that Leader was not being left to the life of tranquillity which had been prescribed for him. Old Roper at Bode had hinted as much, and suspected mischievous urchins of mounting the animal; but Silas knew better. Silas knew that old Roper had not had time to ride with Rosemary lately, and he drew his own conclusions—conclusions which Mary had not been able to refute. Rosemary loved a gallop—a headlong, break-neck gallop—as she loved nothing else on earth. And as the pace of the cantering animal above him quickened, Silas realized that he had caught the culprit red-handed.

He turned and took a slanting course up the rise to the corner above the barn where he knew that she must draw rein. He went hard, with a wild violence of effort that suited his mood. Not often in his life had so fierce a tempest of wrath raged within him. It burned like a furnace, and he was not conscious of any physical effort. Everything he did seemed part of that tremendous storm, just as those galloping hoofs seemed a part. It was as if they hammered on his brain.

Then, almost before he knew it, he had reached the top, and was standing against the railing as Leader dashed up. The animal saw him first, and swerved. His rider kept her seat with an effort and a laughing protest. She had no saddle and her only bridle was the rope of his halter. She carried a riding-switch, however, and she struck the horse lightly with it by way of admonition.

"What did you do that for, Leader? Do you want to throw me, you old rotter?"

The fact that she had not been thrown was one which testified to the excellence of her horsemanship. Even Silas conceded that as he strode forward into the open.

She recognized him in a moment, and made Leader back before him, pawing the ground like a circus-horse. "Hullo!" she said coolly. "You, is it?"

"Yes, me!" said Silas between his teeth. "What are you doing on that horse? Don't you know he's lame?"

"He isn't when I ride him," said Rosemary, unabashed. "He doesn't mind featherweights, do you, Leader?"

As Leader stood about seventeen hands high, it seemed an unnecessary question; but it failed to propitiate the incensed Silas.

He took one more gigantic stride and seized the animal

by the forelock. "Get down, do you hear?" he said thickly. "I'll have no more of these damned tricks. Get down!"

Rosemary jerked the horse back again in angry astonishment. That anyone—even the redoubtable Silas—could fail to appreciate her prowess seemed incredible. Clinging on with her knees, she raised her riding-whip. "Let go! Let go!" she cried furiously. "I've done no harm to you or Leader either. I won't get down just because you say so!"

"You will!" said Silas.

He kept his grip upon the horse, and Leader, recognizing him, tried to submit. But the girl on his back suddenly turned into a little tornado of fury which upset his nervous balance. He found himself a bone of contention and began to dance and rear.

She clung to her perch like a limpet, but it was only a matter of seconds ere she realized that the man who hung on so stubbornly to Leader's head was master of the situation. When that knowledge came to her, the last shred of her self-control evaporated. She leaned well forward over Leader's neck and brought her riding-switch down straight and hard upon his grim, uplifted face.

She had the satisfaction of hearing him exclaim, but there all cause for elation ended. For—what happened she never quite knew—there followed such a turmoil of movement that she found it impossible to maintain her balance. She felt herself slipping, clutched desperately at Leader's mane; and then she had lost all hold and seemed to be suspended in mid-air in the grip of a giant.

The next thing she knew was the squelch of Leader's

hoofs as he blundered away and the sense of finding her feet on the muddy ground after a breathless struggle to save herself from falling.

When she was able finally to take a steadier view of things, she discovered that the whirlwind had passed, and she was standing face to face with Silas in the gloaming. Her blouse was torn at the neck and her breeches were covered with mud. She realized that he had just set her on her feet after holding her dangling as though she had been a kitten, and very bitterly she resented the fact. She felt like a boy caught raiding an orchard.

She had dropped her switch in the *mélée*, and after a hasty glance around she discovered it in Silas's grasp.

"Give that to me!" she commanded, pointing.

He answered her in a voice that seemed to come from the very depths of him, like the growl of an angry beast.

"Yes, I will give it to you, you little varmint! You've asked for it, and you shall have it!"

The deadly intention with which he uttered the words was almost as forcible as a blow in itself. Rosemary recoiled in spite of herself, then gamely she returned to the attack.

"Oh, you think you'll threaten me, do you?" she said. "It's the sort of thing one would expect from a man like you. But if you think I'm afraid of you, you're jolly well mistaken. Hand over that whip and don't waste my time!"

"Your—time!" said Silas. For the moment her effrontery nearly bore him backwards. Then red rage gained the upper hand again. "You think I'm to be trampled on like that, do you?" he said. "Think you can trespass on my field, ride my horse, and hit me over

the head, all for nothing! A damned little baggage like you that has never done anything to justify existence yet!"

He took a furious step forward, but Rosemary did not give ground a second time. She confronted him with a courage that scorned retreat.

"I shouldn't have hit you if you hadn't interfered with me," she said. "As to trespassing in your field, that's rot! We all do it. As to riding your horse, I challenge you to prove that I have done him any harm. Now—give me my property and I'll go!"

She stretched out her hand for it and even grasped it, but in a second he had wrenched it from her. He would have thrust it behind him, but she sprang at him like a little panther in a futile effort to snatch it from him.

It was childish and undignified, and in that moment she lost all that she had gained. For he gripped her extended arm and flung her round, holding her for chastisement as if she had been a boy.

"You've asked for it!" he said again. "You shall have it!"

She made a frantic struggle, but her feet slipped on the wet earth and she lost her balance. She went down on her face, still struggling, and as he pulled her up again the blouse she wore which was already torn ripped like a rag, exposing her white shoulders and bosom, and the dainty cambric underwear which Bobby always insisted upon for her darling.

It was a sight that brought Silas very suddenly to a stop. It was as if he turned a mental somersault. Hitherto he had regarded Rosemary as a being without sex, but more nearly resembling the male than the female. Now,

abruptly, he realized his mistake. He drew in his breath hissing between his teeth, and in that breath his violence was quenched, as though water had been flung upon fire. He let her go.

"You get along home!" he commanded gruffly. "And don't come this way again!"

She drew away from him, burningly aware of the fact to which she owed her deliverance, shaking also from head to foot and unable to control herself.

Silas thrust out the switch to her. His look avoided hers. "Here you are! Now run along home!" he said. Then, abruptly, "Damn! It's raining. Have this!"

He dragged off his coat and held it out for her. But she stood, still trembling, making no effort to move.

"Come on!" said Silas. He was still angry, but—oddly—not with her. He took her arms, first one then the other, and pushed them into the sleeves of his coat. Then he wrapped it over her bare shoulders and buttoned it in front.

"There!" he said. "That better?"

The switch had fallen from her nerveless fingers. He picked it up and gave it to her again. An urgent desire to put an end to the situation had come upon him. He had never in his life before felt at so hopeless a disadvantage.

That Rosemary could be feeling the same did not occur to him, and when her wild trembling abruptly ended in a burst of tears he was both shocked and perplexed.

"Oh, damn it!" he said. "You're not hurt. What is it! What's the matter?"

Then, as she failed to tell him but continued to sob forlornly like a lost child, desperation came upon him.

He bent and took her, almost seized her, into his arms, and started down the hill with her through the darkness and falling rain.

She uttered a small cry at his action, but made no fight for freedom. And so he bore her, weeping, to the stile, which he crossed in one great stride, and then up the sodden track from which he had turned in his misery a sort time before, Nero plodding patiently behind him as though he saw nothing extraordinary in his master's conduct.

When they reached the open space and the duck-pond in front of Little Staple, Rosemary spoke for the first time, in a very small voice.

"May I use your hanky? I've lost mine."

"All right," said Silas. "You'll find it in the pocket."

He pushed open the gate and went up the flagged path. "Please wait a minute!" said Rosemary.

But the door opened while she was speaking, and Bobby's figure appeared on the threshold, outlined against the lamplight behind.

"Oh, Rosemary—my darling!" she said, and ran out to meet them.

"It's all right," said Silas. "She isn't hurt."

He made as if he would have transferred his burden to her, then, realizing that Rosemary weighed more than an ordinary infant, straightened again and carried her into the house himself.

"Bring her into the parlour!" said Bobby. "What has happened? Rosemary—darling—you are crying!"

"No, I'm not," said Rosemary, with a sob. "I'm—I'm quite all right. Please put me down now!" to Silas. "Don't let's make a fuss!"

He placed her solemnly upon the sofa, but she was off it in a moment and laughing rather desperately at Bobby's distress. "I'm quite all right, dear Aunt Bobby. Can't you see? I've—I've been riding Leader, and—and—"

"I pulled her off," said Silas.

"No, he didn't!" Fiercely she interrupted. "I fell off, and he picked me up. It—it was jolly decent of him. I was rather dazed just at first, and he brought me home. That's all, dear Aunt Bobby! Don't make a fuss! I'm really quite all right. Won't you—won't you ask Mr. Hickory to sit down a minute while I change and dry his coat?"

"Of course sit down!" said Bobby, turning to him. "But you—" with a start—"you have had an accident, too!"

There was a red weal straight across Silas's face, and one eye was nearly closed.

Rosemary spoke with resolution. "That was my doing, Aunt Bobby. I struck him with my whip."

"No, she didn't!" said Silas flatly. "It was the horse she was hitting. He reared, and everyone knows it's the only thing to do. I got in the way. It was my own fault."

He made the statement with a square insistence that would not be gainsaid. Bobby looked, bewildered, from one to the other.

"You both look rather the worse for wear," she said finally. "Rosemary, it was very wrong of you to ride Leader at all. You had better go straight to bed as a punishment. Yes, I mean it," as Rosemary opened her mouth to protest. "You deserve a far worse penalty

than that, and I may decide to give you one. I will think it over. But go now, dear! Go at once!"

Her voice of quiet authority took effect. Rosemary turned to obey; but at the door she paused, stood a moment, then came back to Silas with extended hand.

"Good night, Mr. Hickory!" she said.

He shook hands with her, standing in his shirt-sleeves on the hearth-rug. The smile that lighted his face at her action was that rare smile which Mary so loved to see.

"Good night, Miss Rosemary!" he said. "Don't bother to dry the coat! It'll only get wet again going home."

"Right ho!" said Rosemary.

She went out, pulling the door after her. A moment later she thrust a bare arm into the room with the coat held out. "Here you are!" she said. "And many thanks!"

It was Bobby who took it from her with a murmured rebuke, and a moment later they heard her scamper up the oak stairs like a boy released from school.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" said Bobby, half-vexed, half-laughing, and wholly ill at ease. "What shall I do with her?"

"I'll tell you one thing you'll have to do pretty soon," said Silas, taking his coat from her and putting it on.

"What's that?" said Bobby anxiously.

He answered with uncompromising bluntness. "Stop treating her like a child that doesn't know any better, and treat her as a reasonable being who does."

"But don't I?" said Bobby in distress. "I thought—I hoped—"

Silas interrupted with an unexpected laugh. "I know.

But it's no good. I've had the bump of my life to-day, but it was my fault—not hers. I thought she was just a mischievous child. She isn't. She's a woman."

Bobby looked at him almost in consternation. "Oh, do you think so? She's not eighteen yet."

"And you treat her as if she were eight," said Silas. "I'm only telling you for your information. Don't look so shocked!"

"But only the other day—only the other day," protested Bobby, "you told me she was a spoilt child!"

"Did I?" said Silas. "Well, I was wrong. I should let her come down to supper if I were you. It'll be pleasanter for you both."

"You think she is too old to be punished any longer?" said Bobby, and in her eyes was the yearning look of the woman who realizes that her treasure is exclusively her own no more.

Silas saw it and a species of rather stern pity shone in his own eyes for a moment. "I think," he said quietly, "that life will probably take on that job for you, and nothing else will make any difference." He held out his hand. "Good-bye! I'm going now."

"Must you go?" said Bobby, still rather flustered. "Won't you stay for a little? I haven't seen anything of you for a long time."

"Exactly a week to-morrow," said Silas.

"Oh, is it?" The colour rushed up over her face. "I thought it was longer." She broke off, paused to master her sudden embarrassment, and then spoke more collectedly. "I am sure your eye is hurting you. Won't you let me do something for it?"

"No, thanks," said Silas. "I can't feel it at all. Was

there anything you wanted to talk to me about? Shall I—" he looked at her with abrupt directness—"shall I come round in the morning?"

Bobby hesitated, then with a faint smile yielded. "One of the pigs isn't very well. I don't think it's anything really serious. But perhaps if you could spare a few minutes in the morning— It isn't asking too much of you, is it?" she said, with sudden compunction. "Don't come if you are busy in the other direction! I can get Mr. Roper."

"I am never busy in the other direction," said Silas squarely. "I'll be round about eleven. Don't get Roper till I've been! Good-bye!"

His big hand enveloped hers for a moment, and something like a sigh of relief escaped them both. The old footing was re-established. He went away exactly as he had always gone—without ceremony—a reliable friend who would return.

"Thank goodness for that!" murmured Bobby to herself as she heard the front-door close.

Yes, it had certainly seemed a very long time.

CHAPTER XI

DICK DYNAMO

ROSEMARY's escapade on Leader was followed by an interval of the most exemplary behaviour on her part. For one thing Aunt Bobby had treated the affair leniently and had not demanded to know embarrassing details. Beyond exacting a promise readily given by Rosemary that she would not repeat the offence, she had apparently deemed it wiser to let the matter slip into the background of forgotten sins, and Rosemary was more than willing to let her do so.

Her own impression of that evening's happenings was a rather bewildered one, and her feelings regarding Silas's share therein were of a very mixed character. The fact that he had taken her part in Aunt Bobby's presence was one which excited her alternate gratitude and resentment. There was no doubt that her pride had suffered considerably, but yet in fairness—and Rosemary was very fair—she had to admit that she herself was largely responsible for this. She had put herself completely in the wrong and had thus given him the opportunity to display a generosity of which she had not believed him capable. She even thought to herself sometimes that the whipping which he had barely refrained from administering would have been preferable. But on the other hand the fact that he had realized her womanhood in time to respect it was grati-

fying. On the whole, though somewhat reluctantly, she was inclined to accord to him a certain measure of admiration. He was not quite the country oaf that she had believed him to be. He had shown a sporting spirit, and Rosemary was of the age and type to be more strongly swayed by that than by anything else. She had no intention of relinquishing her hostile attitude towards him in the matter of his friendship with Aunt Bobby. That was rank presumption and no more to be tolerated now than heretofore. But for the man himself her feelings had undergone a change. He was a sportsman.

It seemed that the honours of war had been divided, and she was well aware that she owed this to his chivalry—a quality of which she had imagined him to be wholly devoid. Therefore some degree of deference was due to him, and Rosemary, being fair-minded, was not the sort of girl to deny it.

She avoided Staple Farm for some days, but it was rather from a sense of embarrassment than one of antagonism. But when she finally came face to face with Silas one evening in their own farmyard nearly a week later her attitude was wholly impersonal and free from strain. She had recovered her equilibrium. She knew that he had been in to see her aunt several times, and she had purposely kept out of the way. But now her free pose announced that she had returned to the old footing. While not actively disliking him, he was an interloper and she did not want him.

She was riding old Dobbin the cart-horse in from the plough, and as Silas opened the gate for her she looked down upon him with a good deal of dignity.

“Thank you,” she said. “If you are waiting for my

aunt, I think she has gone to see old Mrs. Everett and may be some time."

She walked Dobbin on to his stable with the words. Silas turned and followed, and waited for her at the door.

Rosemary did not hurry. She dismounted and proceeded to give Dobbin a rub-down, whistling the while. When she had finished, she fed him with oats and hay, and came out to draw a bucket of water.

"I'll do that," said Silas, taking the bucket from her.

"Thank you," said Rosemary again, and allowed him to make himself useful.

But when Dobbin was served and finally tucked up for the night, she faced the visitor with a touch of hauteur.

"Perhaps you would like to give me a message for Aunt Bobby. She won't be back yet."

"I'd sooner wait," said Silas, taking out his pipe.

Rosemary looked at him for a moment, then a sudden gleam lighted her blue eyes. She led the way across the yard. "Certainly. Come in!" she said hospitably.

He slipped his pipe back into his pocket and followed her. There was something about this girl that amused him. Her very animosity was in its fashion entertaining.

She opened the door into the hall and paused, listening.

"Yes, Aunt Matilda is down," she said, nodding towards the parlour. "Come into the kitchen!"

The tact thus displayed somewhat surprised him. The Rosemary of other days would have taken a malicious pleasure in inflicting upon him society for which she knew he had little liking. Yet he did not make the mistake of thinking that it was dictated by any kindness on her part. She evidently had an end in view, and he became curious to know what it was. He followed her

across the hall as she lightly preceded him and entered the kitchen behind her.

The fire was burning cheerily and the kettle hissed upon it in readiness for tea. Bobby had set everything in order before going out. Teapot and tea-caddy stood side by side on the table with the tray.

"Sit down!" said Rosemary, pointing to a wooden arm-chair besire the open hearth.

Silas complied with a certain wariness. She slipped off her coat and prepared to make the tea; but in a moment moved across to the dresser to light the lamp.

Silas watched her. Her lithe quick movements had the same daintiness as had those of Roberta Wendholme, her form in its boyish garb the same delicacy of outline. Her face, seen in the fitful light of the fire, might have been that of Bobby herself, except for that little mocking smile about the lips which with Bobby would have been merely whimsical. A more complete resemblance could scarcely have existed. As Peter had said, they might have been cast in the same mould. Time alone had traced the difference between them. Roberta at Rosemary's age must have been exactly the same.

Silas's heart stirred within him with a strange intensity of feeling. Notwithstanding her pride of bearing, the girl before him had a pathos which banished any lingering sense of hostility. He pitied her with a deep compassion that somehow had its root in his love for Bobby. In that moment there arose within him a force of devotion that embraced them both. Do what she might to frustrate him, Rosemary would never provoke him to enmity again.

She turned from lighting the lamp and opened a drawer

of the old dresser. "Here's something here I think you would like to see!"

"What is it?"

He saw that she was holding a book. She crossed the room to his side. "It's Aunt Bobby's album of snaps," she explained. "She hardly ever takes any now. There is no time. These were nearly all done before we came to Stapleton. Perhaps you would like to look at them while I get the tea." She placed it in his hands and turned away.

He opened the book towards the end and found one or two recent photographs of herself, but it was not full and he turned to the beginning.

On the first page was a full-length portrait of a man in hunting-dress on horseback.

He sat and stared at it, arrested by some inner prompting that moved him to take in every detail. The picture was one of those amateur inspirations which occasionally beat all the art of the professional. The pose of both horse and rider was superb. The man's whole air was patrician, but not arrogantly so. His bearing was military and supremely confident. He had the daring look of one accustomed to override all obstacles. His features were clean-cut and purposeful as his limbs were lean and strong, essentially a man of great personal attraction, a man to whom women would accord almost instinctive homage.

"Who is this?" said Silas.

There was a deep interrogation in his voice that caused Rosemary to set down the kettle in the act of pouring out.

She came and looked over his shoulder. "That? Oh, that's Aunt Bobby's *fiancé*! He rode in the Grand Na-

tional when he was in the Army, and he was always called Dick Dynamo. Jolly fine, isn't he? No wonder Aunt Bobby fell in love with him!"

Silas remained absolutely motionless, his attention fixed. She looked down at his black head, the dancing light of mischief still in her eyes, and continued, airily communicative.

"He went to California. He wanted her to go too, but she wouldn't. But he is coming back to fetch her some day, and I shall be jolly glad when he does, for I'm tired of this hole."

"Oh, you would go too, would you?" said Silas.

"Of course I should go!" she declared with emphasis. "I don't know what would happen to Aunt Matilda, but anyhow I wouldn't be left behind. Aunt Bobby would never go anywhere without me." She spoke with complacence. "I shouldn't wonder if it wasn't because of me that she didn't go with him in the first place. But of course Grandpa was alive then too, and Aunt Matilda never could be trusted to look after anybody."

She returned to her tea-making as she spoke, still with one eye upon Silas. He had not moved, but she noticed that one powerful hand was hard clenched upon the arm of his chair.

After a considerable pause he asked another question in that deep, insistent voice of his. "Does she ever hear from him?"

Rosemary hesitated. She had hoped he would not ask her that. Strict truth, however, had been inculcated in her from her cradle and she found herself compelled to cling to its fringe.

"Well, not often; at least not lately. That's what

makes me wonder sometimes if perhaps he may be on his way back to find her. I am sure she will never send him away again. She is very, very, very fond of him. She wears his ring always."

"On her right hand," said Silas with a sudden stab of memory.

"Yes. It ought to be on her left as they're engaged, oughtn't it?" said Rosemary. "I have often thought so myself, and I shall tell her you say so."

Silas stirred at that, lifted his head for the first time. It was a good thing for Rosemary that she had returned the kettle to the hob, or she would certainly have dropped it.

"You needn't do that," he said briefly. "I haven't said it. Now tell me! Did she tell you all this—or did you make it up?"

Rosemary faced him with kindling wrath. To be called to account for telling the truth was not to be tolerated for a moment. "I don't know what you mean," she said. "Of course I didn't make it up. You can ask her if you don't believe me. Or no! You had better not! She can't bear to talk of him—to strangers."

"I see," said Silas. His sternness died down, and he quietly closed the album and laid it aside. "That's enough for to-night. I think I'll go."

He got up without anger, and again his look comprehended Rosemary with an odd compassion.

She met it with defiant surprise. In some fashion she felt as if he had defeated her in the very moment of success.

"I can tell you some more about him," she said, "if

you'd like to hear it. I don't mind talking about him. I only wish he'd come back."

"I shouldn't wish too hard if I were you," said Silas. "You're happier as you are. Good night!"

He turned to go and Rosemary made no effort to stay him. Somehow, though her *ruse* had succeeded, she did not feel wholly satisfied with the trend events had taken.

As he went out, she picked up the album and opened it again upon the portrait of the gallant figure on horseback.

"Oh, I do wish you'd come back!" she said with a sigh. "I've never seen you—but I know I'd love you!"

PART II

CHAPTER I

THREE FRIENDS

PERCY HUDSON sprawled in an old wicker-chair in the room which was still known as the nursery and smoked a pipe of disreputable tobacco while his college friend, affectionately known to all and sundry as The Old Bean, sat cross-legged on the floor and oiled his shooting-boots. His real name was Donald Ross, but Mrs. Hudson was the only person at the Vicarage who ever remembered the fact. Even the servants knew him as "Mr. Bean."

The friendship between himself and Percy Hudson was one which no one could understand, for Percy was of a most energetic and restless temperament while The Old Bean was supremely quiet and self-contained. He never did anything in a hurry, though as Percy ungrudgingly admitted, he always got there in the end. One of his main characteristics was that he knew exactly what he wanted to do and therefore he never wasted his time in futile effort. There were some who thought him lazy, but Percy would never allow this.

"He's just economical by nature, that's all," he said. "What's the good of running after things you've no use for? He's game enough when he's keen."

This natural economy was a trait which in himself was conspicuously lacking. Unless at the end of the day he

could feel that he had been "all out," as he expressed it, then the day, as far as he was concerned, had been a failure. He had an absolute passion for sport of all kinds, and spent much of his time in training. The Old Bean on the contrary merely took sport—as he took wine—when it came his way, made the most of it and thoroughly enjoyed it. He was a little older than Percy and a man of independent means. He had chosen to go to the University because a certain amount of learning seemed to him worth while and, since he had become a close friend of the turbulent Percy, a certain amount of sport also attracted him. He never overdid things in either direction while acquitting himself with fair credit in both.

"I want," he would say, "to feel that I could earn my own living if I ever had to, and so I shall take my degree as that carries a certain amount of prestige. I shall also study game-keeping as I believe I could make a success of it if I had to. And engineering as a matter of course, though I know the trade is hopelessly overcrowded."

Engineering was his hobby. Nothing in the world appealed to him so much. But, as he said, engineers were a glut in the market and he could regard it as no more than a pastime. He had not the genius for invention, and he could scarcely hope to make his mark as an engine-driver, but he could drive an engine at a pinch. A long line of Scotch ancestry had induced this line of reasoning. He had inherited an ancient castle in the Highlands and a good many acres of forest that were quite useless for anything but stag-hunting. He was not rich, but he had no need to work. He worked merely out of that sense of natural economy for which Percy respected him.

Percy on the other hand did not work. He spent himself to the utmost in a fever of occupation. But it was not work. He did nothing from the valid motive of rendering himself independent. To his father's grief he displayed no aptitude for matters clerical. The only desire he had ever expressed was to become a professional boxer. He supposed he would have to scrape into the Church some day, but he avoided the thought at all times. He wanted to enjoy himself. Life in his eyes was a priceless gift that must on no account be squandered. He had an immense capacity for enjoyment, and an almost fierce resentment against anything that threatened to interfere with its indulgence.

"Dash it all! We're only young once!" he would exclaim if The Old Bean ever ventured to expostulate, which was not often, being waste of time and effort. "It's a damn' shame if we mayn't enjoy ourselves while we can. We'll never get the chance later in life. What's the good of saving up for mouldy old age?"

The Old Bean might then point out mildly that to die in the workhouse was not an enviable end to a glorious beginning, but Percy never listened. He had a horror of death and old age and refused point-blank to contemplate either.

"Time enough for them!" he would say. "And all the more reason to enjoy ourselves while we may!"

And The Old Bean, despite the fact that he was of a far more philosophical turn, would yield the point without demur. He was very fond of Percy in a calm and unobtrusive fashion and he seldom raised objection to anything that he did or said.

Mrs. Hudson regarded him as an excellent companion

for her boy, and so in the matter of solid worth he was. But—if she had only known it—he was too economical to throw himself away in fruitless exhortations, and Percy always went his own way in his company. It was generally Percy who did most of the talking.

He was talking now in between whiffs at his execrable tobacco which mingling with the odour of the oil with which The Old Bean was treating his boots rendered the atmosphere practically unfit for human consumption.

"It's all very fine for you, Old Bean," he was saying somewhat moodily, being tired after five hours' tramp with the guns and a meagre bag. "You've got everything in life that you want. You don't need even to walk up your game if you don't feel like it."

"I like walking 'em up," observed The Old Bean. "Better fun I always think."

"It's the fashion to say that," said Percy discontentedly.

The Old Bean smiled a little over his job. He had sandy hair and eyebrows and a red face of many freckles. "Oh, I'm nothing if not fashionable," he said.

Percy laughed, half against his will. "You look it, tinkering up those old boots. P'raps you'd like to have a go at mine when they're finished. They need it quite as much."

"I will if I feel like it," said The Old Bean placidly. "You might stick a cigarette in my mouth and light it for me! I'm a mass of oil."

Percy complied. "Can't think why you don't smoke a pipe," he said, as he did so. "Much better value."

"Yes, I believe it is," said The Old Bean. "But I'm waiting till I get married. I shall have more time then."

"You'll never get married," said Percy scathingly.
"You're much too stuffy and middle-aged."

"To the casual observer—perhaps," said The Old Bean.

"Why, you can't even dance," said Percy.

"I try," said The Old Bean.

Percy laughed again with more good-will. "Would you like to learn, my dear old stodger?"

"Not from you, thank you very much," said The Old Bean, with courteous decision.

"You'll never get anyone else to teach you unless you pay for it," observed Percy unkindly.

"Never mind!" said The Old Bean.

The sudden opening of the door disturbed the discussion, and both young men started at the intrusion of a laughing face surrounded by a shiny black sou'-wester.

"Anybody at home?" asked a gay voice.

Percy leaped to his feet with a whoop of welcome. "Hullo, scaramouche! Come right in! How ripping of you to look us up!"

"I didn't," said Rosemary, entering. "I brought the eggs, and as everyone seemed out, I thought I'd have a look round. What a filthy smell! Hullo! Here's The Old Bean! Don't get up for goodness' sake! You'll only spread it. How do you both manage to breathe?"

"Oh, we don't bother about breathing," said Percy. "It's a waste of time in any case. Don't say you've turned hygienic since I saw you last!"

"Oh no!" said Rosemary. "Nobody turns anything but mouldy in these parts. Do give me one of your cigarettes, Old Bean! I haven't smoked one since I saw you last."

"Here! Have one of mine!" said Percy jealously.
"They're much nicer than his."

"Oh no, they're not!" declared Rosemary. "The Scotch laddie knows what's what. Where are they, Old Bean? In your pocket? Hoots, mon, don't disturb yourself! I can find them."

She thrust a hand into his jacket-pocket without ceremony and drew forth his cigarette-case with the words.

"All I have is yours," murmured The Old Bean, continuing his loathsome occupation with scarcely a pause.

"You here for Christmas?" asked Rosemary, choosing her cigarette. "Hullo! Here's a snap of someone in the lid! Who is it? Why—why, it's me!"

"Yes, it is you," said The Old Bean, without looking up. "I got you at the meet. Don't you remember? It must have been last Easter Monday, for I wasn't here in the summer."

"What cheek!" said Rosemary.

"Tear it up if you don't like it!" said The Old Bean pacifically. "You grow so fast. It isn't a bit like you now."

"Tear it up yourself if you want to!" retorted Rosemary. "Isn't he an ass, Percy?"

"A. One. Outsize!" said Percy. "A braw Hieland loon, in short. Want a match? You can sit in that chair if you like. It's more dependable than the rest."

He lighted her cigarette for her, and returned the case with the snapshot still intact to The Old Bean's pocket.

Rosemary subsided in the chair he had just vacated. "Do open the window!" she pleaded, "or I shall die!"

"Oh, don't do that!" said Percy, complying. "You're

the only bright spot in the universe at the present moment. Now tell us all the news! Stapleton is the same giddy whirl of frivolous activities, I suppose?"

"Oh, rather!" said Rosemary. "And you're home just in time for the Rummage Sale. Is that what The Old Bean is disguising his boots for?"

"Not only his boots," laughed Percy. "He's going to sell himself as a scarecrow for Silas Hickory's crops this time."

"Is he really?" said Rosemary, interested. "What price is he going to ask?"

"That's the point under consideration!" declared Percy. "What do you think he'd fetch?"

Rosemary considered. "I don't believe Silas would give much for him. He's much too keen on a good bargain."

"What would you give?" suggested The Old Bean amicably.

Rosemary pulled the pockets of her mackintosh inside out with an eloquent gesture.

"He means what would you give if you had it," said Percy, seating himself on the arm of her chair.

"I don't know," said Rosemary. "I don't think he'd be much good to me in that capacity."

"Perhaps you could suggest another," said The Old Bean.

She shook her head. "You're not adaptable enough, I'm afraid."

"You'd better be nice to him," said Percy. "He's brought his car this time. When he's not oiling his boots, he's oiling her. She's rather a beauty. You'll have to learn to drive her."

"Oh, I should like that!" exclaimed Rosemary, dropping her cigarette in her enthusiasm. "Will you teach me, Old Bean? Will you? It would be ripping of you."

The Old Bean looked up at her, blinking a little. He was short-sighted, and usually wore glasses. "I'll try if you like," he said.

Percy uttered a rude laugh. "Isn't he flattering? The woman driver, you must know, does not hold a very strong appeal for The Old Bean. He maintains that the driving-bump is lacking."

"I prefer her as a mascot certainly," murmured The Old Bean.

"Pig!" said Rosemary tersely. "Well, I refuse to be your mascot or anyone else's. Talking of meets, there's one at Ravencombe next Saturday, Percy. Shall we go?"

"Rather!" said Percy. "I'll call for you, shall I? It's a good five miles. We shall have to start early. No, dash it, we'll motor! The Old Bean can take us."

"Delighted, I'm sure!" said The Old Bean. "Is there anywhere where one can leave the car?"

"Oh, yes," said Rosemary. "You can put it in the yard at The Ravencombe Arms. It's almost at the gates. We'll all take our lunch and make a day of it."

"Is old Ravencombe still alive?" said Percy. "He must be at least a hundred."

"More, I should think," said Rosemary. "He looked like an Egyptian mummy the last time I saw him. They say he's quite mad, has been for years."

"Rum old bird!" commented Percy. "Who's his heir?"

"Goodness knows! Don't think he's got one. Probably outlived them all," laughed Rosemary. "How awful

it must be to get old like that! Oh, bother! My fag's gone out. Light it again for me, there's a dear!"

"Oh, I'm always that!" declared Percy. "All right then! We'll go to Ravencombe on Saturday. And I say! What about one of those subscription dances at Bode Town Hall some evening? There's going to be a regular swell affair on Boxing Day. Can't you come to it?"

"With you?" said Rosemary, with dancing eyes. "My hat! How I should love to!"

"Well, can't you?" said Percy. "I'll look after you and see you don't dance with the wrong people."

"How I should love it!" said Rosemary. "But—" she heaved a big sigh—"I'm sure Aunt Bobby would never let me. Besides,—I've nothing to wear."

"Fancy dress is optional," he said lightly, "so you can come in any old thing you like—or nothing at all if it pleases you."

"Be quiet, and let me think!" said Rosemary.

"Wear a red shirt and riding-breeches and come as Garibaldi!" he suggested.

"Yes, that's an idea! But I couldn't dance in top-boots, could I?" she objected.

"Bare feet would be better and more realistic," he assured her.

She made a face at him. "And have them trodden on by you! No, thank you very much! I think I'll come as an old gipsy woman and tell all your fortunes."

"Oh rot! You can't come as anything old! I won't allow it," said Percy. "Can't you think of something really jolly?"

"Wait!" cried Rosemary suddenly. "I've got an idea!"

I know where I can get a dress and shoes and everything! It'll be very long and old-fashioned, but it'll fit. But I shall have to creep away without being seen and bring the things with me. I shan't be able to dress at home."

"Oh, that doesn't matter," said Percy. "We'll stop at *The King's Head* and you can change there. It's close to the Town Hall. I say, this is ripping! What do you say to the scheme, Old Bean?"

The Old Bean looked up. There was a streak of oil smeared down one side of his face and his general appearance was thoroughly dishevelled. But there was a certain quality in his green-brown eyes that discounted any suggestion of rakishness.

He looked straight at Rosemary as he said, "I don't know if it's a good scheme or not, but if it comes off, I shall be there."

"Hear, hear!" cried Rosemary gaily. "The more the merrier!"

CHAPTER II

AN AFFAIR OF PARTNERSHIP

"It seems to me," said Matilda, "that Rosemary is getting more and more spoilt every day. Why don't you keep her more to her lessons?"

"She is getting beyond them," said Bobby thoughtfully. "It would be the holidays in any case now. But, you know, she will be eighteen in January."

"Oh, you needn't remind me of that!" said Matilda pettishly. "I'm sure I don't care how old or how young she is so long as she behaves herself. But she never does nowadays. She is always rude and off-hand. I can't think why you don't keep her in better order."

"Don't you think," said Bobby gently, "that she has a right to grow up?"

Matilda made an impatient sound. "You are always on her side and ready to make excuses for her. I don't dispute her right to grow up. I only wish she would do it quickly and cease to behave like a spoilt child. I am always wondering what mad thing she will do next. The present craze seems to be to run after Percy Hudson at every possible moment. I can't think why you allow it."

"She needs young companionship," said Bobby, bending her flushed face over her ironing. "I do not think I ought to deprive her of it."

"You have changed your views lately, then," com-

mented Matilda, "for you used to be much more particular."

Bobby said nothing. It had always been impossible to argue with Matilda. Moreover, what she said was not without reason. She had made repeated efforts in the past to curb the child which of late she had allowed to lapse. To tell Matilda that this had been due to advice from Silas Hickory was out of the question. Therefore she remained silent.

"I suppose you know that she has gone off to the meet at Ravencombe with Percy Hudson and his friend?" pursued Matilda, not to be discouraged.

Bobby glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. "Yes, I know," she said. "She took some lunch with her. I expect she will be back before long."

"It wouldn't surprise me in the least if she ran off one of these days and did not come back," remarked Matilda.

Bobby turned upon her with a flash of unwonted anger. "You have no right whatever to suggest such a thing as that! She is far too open and candid to be capable of it. And thank heaven that she is!"

"Dear me!" said Matilda with a brief laugh. "I should have thought that I had every justification for expressing an opinion. I really don't see how you can claim to know her better than I do. In fact I should imagine that I am a far more impartial judge of her character. For you have always made an idol of her, and I—have not."

Bobby returned to her ironing with compressed lips. Matilda had been even more exasperating than usual of late, but she always blamed herself for being exasperated. For, after all, Matilda's opinion did not really count with

anyone. Even when apparently, as now, she got the better of an argument, it did not signify in the least. She carried no weight. It was almost absurd to be angry with anyone who could never be anything but peevish in return.

Also, it was not in Bobby's sunny nature to be angry for long, and presently she was smiling again and talking of the forthcoming Rummage Sale at the Parish Room at which she had rashly promised to assist.

"I think you are very foolish to go," said Matilda. "You always say you are so pressed for time."

"Cox will have to lend a hand," said Bobby serenely. "I really couldn't miss the Rummage Sale. It's the most amusing event of the year."

"Then you are very easily amused, that's all I can say," observed Matilda.

She retired with the words into the parlour and pushed the door behind her to indicate that she was not in the mood for further conversation. A faint sigh of relief escaped Bobby, but she continued her task without looking up. It was quite true that time was short.

Her thoughts turned, as often, to Rosemary, and a sigh of a different nature escaped her. Was she going to the other extreme and allowing the child too much liberty? She wished there were someone to consult, and as if in answer to the wish there came the tread of heavy boots past the window and she looked up and saw Silas Hickory.

She could not check the quick sense of pleasure that arose within her at the sight of him. He did not come as often now as formerly, and never without a very sufficient reason, but his attitude towards her had under-

gone no apparent change. He was what he had declared he would be—a friend upon whom she could count.

She went swiftly to the back-door to meet him, and intercepted him in the act of passing.

"Why aren't you coming in?" she said.

He stopped short and his hand went to his cap. His smile sent a glow through her that surprised and even faintly disconcerted her.

"I just came round to see Cox about the red cow's calf," he said. "Is he anywhere about?"

"You can see me instead," said Bobby with an answering smile.

He came straight to her without delay. "Busy as usual!" he said, as he entered.

"Yes, ironing," said Bobby. "I don't often iron on a Saturday, but I got behind this week on account of poor old Mrs. Everett. I am afraid she won't live very long."

"And you go to see her?" said Silas.

"When I can," she answered. "There is so little one can do."

"Little!" He echoed the word on a note almost of indignation. "When you spend your whole life working for other people!"

"Oh, don't!" said Bobby. "I never do anything I don't want to."

"To be sure! I forgot that," said Silas.

The quiet but decided shutting of the door that communicated with the parlour attracted his attention and he glanced towards it and back to Bobby.

"Sit down!" she said, ignoring it. "I am just finishing."

But Silas remained on his feet. "I can't sit down while

you work," he said. "Can't you give me something to do?"

She bent again to her ironing, pushing the soft hair back from her hot forehead. "Life is very difficult, Silas," she said.

It was the first time she had ever addressed him by his Christian name, but he accepted it with absolute simplicity. It was part of the *rôle* he had assigned to himself.

"What's troubling you?" he asked after a moment.

She replied without looking up. "I took your advice about Rosemary, but I am not sure that letting her run wild is a good thing. There is so little young companionship for her here."

"What does she want more than you?" said Silas.

She uttered a sad little laugh. "Heaps and heaps of things. And I am not really young. When I was her age, I had lots of gaiety. Poor little Rosemary never has any. She hasn't even got a girl friend."

"She's got you," maintained Silas stubbornly.

"I am getting old," said Bobby.

"How dare you say that?" said Silas.

She sent him a quick glance and turned away to change her iron in silence.

He watched her rather aggressively for a space, then spoke abruptly, on a different note. "You've no right to be getting old. It's only care that makes you so. Look here! I've been thinking lately,—thinking a lot. I'm not going back over old ground. That's finished. But I want to know—want very much to know—if you'd consider another proposition with me. It's a scheme that I've often thought might be worked with advantage between farmers in this country. As things now are, the

small ones nearly always go to the wall. And it's mighty hard that it should be so, for in my opinion they needn't,—not, that is, if they are prepared to work half as hard as you do."

"I like work," said Bobby.

"I know you do. That's what makes you so fine. But overworking—" Silas spoke forcibly—"overworking means destruction sooner or later. You like running your own show. You like to be independent. So do I. But, you may take it from me, a one-horse show in farming is a big risk. It may answer for a time, but not for ever. And then if a run of bad luck comes, you're dished. You've no reserve. And you can't prevent bad luck either. It just comes."

"What a depressing thought!" said Bobby.

"It's a maddening thought," said Silas, "but you can't get away from it. Bad luck doesn't always stick to those who deserve it."

"It's no good looking on the dark side," said Bobby.

"It's no good refusing to face the inevitable either," retorted Silas. "There's a limit to everything, especially when you work beyond your strength. It may take some years to reach it, but it will be reached some day. Who's going to look after this show when you're finished? Tell me that!"

"I'm not looking so far ahead as that," said Bobby resolutely.

"You ought to look ahead," he said. "Anyone with responsibilities ought to look ahead. What were you telling me just now? That Rosemary was getting beyond you. And why, I should like to know? Simply because you haven't the time to look after her."

"It's no good saying that," said Bobby.

"No good!" He caught her up almost angrily. "If it isn't going to make any difference, I agree with you, it's waste of time talking. But if it is,—"

"Well, but how can it?" said Bobby.

She spoke rather wearily. It had been a tiring day, and though she was pleased to see Silas, she was not prepared for a battle of wills. He was inclined to be somewhat overwhelming when once he had set himself to the task of quelling objections.

He heard the note of wistfulness in her voice, and his manner changed. "I really didn't mean to start on this subject," he said. "You're very tired, and perhaps it isn't the time. Let's talk it over another day!"

But a spirit of perversity moved Bobby to refuse the respite. "I hate putting off the evil hour," she said. "I think I'd better hear it now."

"So that you can sleep on it and turn it down in the morning!" observed Silas, with grim humour. "Well, you shall if you want to. My suggestion is simply this. I have made a good thing of my farm as my father did before me. You have so far made a good thing of yours. Why can't we enter into partnership together? It's been one concern before. It could be made so again, and it would be a mutual benefit."

"Oh!" said Bobby, turning very red. She paused with her iron uplifted, and stared at him. "What—what an extraordinary idea!" she said.

"It isn't a bit extraordinary," declared Silas. "I've had it in my mind for some time. I'm interested in Little Staple, always have been."

"You want to buy us out!" she said quickly.

"Now don't!" said Silas. "I don't want to do anything of the sort, or I shouldn't have suggested partnership to you. That's not logic, is it?"

She set down her iron. "No, I'm not very logical," she said. "But—it is rather a surprising idea, isn't it? You knew I wasn't expecting it."

"Oh yes, I knew that," said Silas, with a smile. "But now I've put it to you, will you think it over? It would have to be put on a strictly business footing of course. There's a lawyer over at Bode who could see to that. But there's no hurry. Take time to decide! All I ask is that you will try to realize exactly what it would mean before you begin to refuse."

"I know already," said Bobby.

Again she pushed back the hair from her damp forehead, and there was something oddly pathetic in the gesture. But she said no more though her silence also had its appeal.

"No, you don't know," said Silas. "If you think you do, you're simply jumping to conclusions. I'm not suggesting anything that can in any way offend your pride or your love of independence. I honour you far too much. If you were a bad manager, I shouldn't think of it. I loathe bad management. And you needn't think I'd try to make it a stepping-stone to matrimony either. I'm not that sort of man any more than you're that sort of woman." He paused.

"Thank you," murmured Bobby faintly.

He continued. "It would be an absolute business arrangement from every point of view. The two farms would amalgamate, that's all. You would be the junior partner. I should be the senior. The stock would become

all one, and we should run it together. The same with the hands. Your man Cox would go in with Brant and the rest. Are you getting the idea?"

Bobby was standing at the end of the table, looking at him. Her flushed face showed no signs of distress, but her eyes had a steadfastness that seemed in some remote sense to hold him away from her.

"Yes," she said slowly, "I'm beginning to see. But—if you want a partner—why not Peter?"

"Peter!" said Silas. "Peter's in my employ. I should never make a partner of Peter."

"He would probably be of much more use to you," said Bobby.

"You don't understand the position," said Silas. "Probably Peter could explain better than I can."

"Oh, I know he is not your equal," she said. "But—from a business point of view at any rate—neither am I. And it is the business point of view that we are considering, isn't it?"

"It is," said Silas. "I have already said that if you were a bad manager I shouldn't think of it. And I mean that. You are a good manager, and an arrangement of this sort ought to appeal to you, because it would give you opportunities that you don't now possess. It would also give you something you're badly in need of—more leisure."

"Ah!" said Bobby, in the tone of one who has arrived at the kernel of things.

"Yes, just so," said Silas. "But will you please remember that in saying that, I am trying to safeguard my interests as well as yours? It isn't to my interest to let Little Staple turn out a failure."

"A failure!" Bobby opened her eyes in swift protest. But Silas refused to be impressed. "Yes, a failure." He repeated the word doggedly. "Oh, I know you'd kill yourself first. But there's no point in killing yourself, and it isn't fair to other people. It isn't a failure, but it isn't a roaring success, and it can be, it ought to be, if we work it together. One-horse shows don't answer nowadays. There's too much hustle required. And you're always talking about stock. You'd like to go in for stock with me, wouldn't you?"

He had struck the right note. Her eyes kindled in spite of her.

"I thought so!" he said, sternly exultant. "Well, can't you see what a show we could make of it? Your share would only be a small one at first, but it'd grow—in the natural course of things; you couldn't prevent it. And think what that'd mean to those dependent on you! To yourself too! You'd be able to afford a holiday now and then and look after the child and give her a few treats. Doesn't that appeal to you?"

"Oh, I mustn't let it," said Bobby, turning away to the fire.

"You can't help it," said Silas. "You know you'd love the farm a thousand times more if it didn't mean such drudgery. The balance of work would have to be re-adjusted. I for instance—I detest accounts. And I know you are good at 'em. I should hand all that part over to you."

"You always pretended you liked them," murmured Bobby, testing an iron near her cheek.

Silas took no notice. "And another thing I want is to build some more sheds along the lane here," he pro-

ceeded. "That's your ground, and I couldn't do it as things are at present. But when we are partners——"

"Oh, but we're not yet!" said Bobby.

"No, not yet." He conceded the point with his sudden smile. "You've got to sleep on it first I know. But there's one thing I promise you, Miss Roberta, and I'll write it down in my heart's blood if you like. If this deal goes through, you and I will never quarrel."

"Oh, don't do anything so conclusive as that!" said Bobby. "I'm not at all easy to get on with. You see, I always get my own way here."

"And you'll always continue to get it," said Silas with finality. "I'll write that instead, shall I?"

She made a gesture of remonstrance. "No, please! I expect I shall refuse when I've thought it over. In fact, I'm nearly sure I shall, though you mustn't think I'm not tremendously grateful to you, for I am."

"I'm nearly sure you will too," said Silas. "But there are always second thoughts. I shall count on them."

She smiled a little. "How persistent you are!"

"It's the only way to get what you want," said Silas.

CHAPTER III

RAVENCOMBE

THE return of Rosemary, eager and excited over the day's happenings, put an end to the discussion. She burst in upon them like a child just home from school, though her expression at sight of Silas was not of a very flattering description.

"I made them hurry back," she said to Bobby, "because I thought you'd be alone. But I suppose I might have known you wouldn't be."

"Aunt Matilda is in the next room," said Bobby tranquilly. "Darling, will you please take off those boots before you go upstairs? And don't forget that Mr. Hickory is here!"

Rosemary turned towards him with obvious reluctance. "How do you do?" she said distantly, and sat down to remove her boots.

"Can I help?" said Silas unexpectedly.

She looked at him with grudging acknowledgment. "I can manage, thanks."

But Silas, with his own peculiar air of refusing to be beaten, approached and, as it were, took her feet from her.

Rosemary leaned back at once. "Oh, if you want to, you can. I'm dog tired. Please, Aunt Bobby, can I have my tea?"

"You can," said Bobby, "when you have washed and made yourself respectable. Thank you very much, Mr. Hickory, for taking the trouble."

"No trouble, I assure you! It's a pleasure," declared Rosemary airily. "Don't interrupt him on any account! By the way, Mr. Hickory, I met a friend of yours—a very dear friend—to-day. Can you guess who it was?"

"Haven't a notion," said Silas.

Rosemary laughed mischievously. "I'll give you a hundred guesses—" she made a playful kick at him with the foot he had just released, and met Bobby's frown with an impish wink—"and you'll never get there."

Silas took no notice whatever, but continued his self-imposed task much as he would have continued to groom a skittish animal.

"I'll tell you," said Rosemary, as he loosened the second boot, "not because you want to know, but because it would be good for you. It was—Lord Ravencombe!"

"Rosemary!" said Bobby sharply.

Silas said nothing until he had removed the boot and set it beside its fellow. Then he looked full at her from under his beetling brows and said briefly, "he's no friend of mine."

"No, I gathered that," said Rosemary smoothly. "The poor old thing is a bit balmy, of course, as we all know; but he seemed quite rational on that point. He hates you like poison."

Aunt Bobby very suddenly took a share in the conversation, her tone quick and decided. "Rosemary, if you can't speak courteously, I won't have you speak at all. Thank you, Mr. Hickory! Thank you very much!"

She stooped to pick up the discarded boots, but he pre-

vented her, his own hand upon them. "Oh, don't stop her!" he said. "I know what she means. Who generally cleans these?"

Bobby evaded the question. "They must be dried first," she said. "Please let me have them!"

"They're all mud. You shan't touch 'em!" said Silas with determination.

Rosemary leaped abruptly to her feet. "Here, give them to me!" she said, and whisked them from his hold. "Whoever cleans them, you won't! That's quite certain. Aunt Bobby won't either. So you needn't trouble yourself about that."

She strode across the brick floor in her stockings, and dumped them down in the chimney-corner. Then she faced round upon Silas with an electric sparkle in her eyes.

"If you want to know what Lord Ravencombe said, I'll tell you," she said. "I went through a gate marked Private and came face to face with him in his bath-chair. He looked awful, like a man that's been dead and buried and dug up again. He said I was trespassing, and asked where I came from. And when I said Little Staple, next to Staple Farm, he raved, and said wasn't that where Silas Hickory lived and why wasn't he in hell where he ought to have been for the past twenty years or more. I couldn't answer that question, so I came away. But he called you quite a lot of choice names while I was going. I'll tell you some of them if you like."

"Rosemary!" For once Bobby's voice sounded actually harsh. "If you say another word upon this subject, you will learn the whole of one of Schiller's plays by heart during the holidays."

"My hat!" said Rosemary. "But, Aunt Bobby, I really think he ought to know. Besides, he wants to, so it's only kind to tell him. I didn't understand all the old thing's remarks. He was too indignant to be very distinct, and his attendant was trying to shut him up. But he did manage to call him a crawling, poisonous snake and a damned dirty scoundrel who seduced women whose shoes he wasn't fit to black. That's why he isn't going to clean mine," she ended on a virtuous note. "I hope you like your description, Mr. Hickory. I'm going upstairs to change now. Good night!"

She was at the door before Bobby spoke again, this time very quietly. "Rosemary, I shall set you that task, and you will not come down again to-night."

"Right ho!" said Rosemary lightly. She was in one of her dare-devil moods in which nothing mattered. "But I had to tell him. He asked for it. The old fellow is quite mad of course, but I expect he had some reason for his hatred. No smoke without some fire, eh, Mr. Hickory? I've never seen anyone quite so consumed by rage before. He literally writhed with it. It's a pity you weren't there to see. Percy and The Old Bean were in the background and they thought he was having a fit."

"Very edifying for all concerned," said Silas.

"It was," she agreed. "I wouldn't have missed it for anything. Yes, Aunt Bobby, I'm going. Don't look so severe! I'll learn a dozen Schiller plays if you like,—that is, if I live long enough which I doubt." She opened the door with the words. "You will let me have some tea, won't you? Or I really shall die without further notice."

She was gone, and somehow the kitchen seemed empty and still. Bobby's faint sigh as she set the irons on the hearthstones to cool was scarcely enough to break the silence.

Silas, watching her, was in no haste to do so. His dark face showed a deep absorption. Perhaps he was scarcely thinking even of her in that moment.

He spoke as she stood up again. "Yes, it's true, old Ravencombe is not keen on our family. He's no particular cause to be. But he's been raving mad for the past forty years, so they say. So perhaps his opinion isn't of much importance."

"None whatever, I should imagine," said Bobby. "I didn't know that anyone ever saw him."

"No one does as a rule. But there has always been one meet held there every season from time immemorial. He probably likes to see it, and they take him to some place where he can see without being seen." Silas still spoke thoughtfully, as if half to himself. "Poor old fellow! It's a bit hard to be made to go on living in that state. I saw him once, and he did look exactly like a man who had been buried and dug up again."

Bobby shivered a little. "Rosemary's descriptions are so vivid, but really she is not so unfeeling as she sounds. She always hides her real self from everyone but me." She paused a moment, then: "It was good of you to bear with her so patiently," she said.

"Oh, I don't mind Rosemary now," said Silas. "In fact, I think I'm on her side. I hope you'll let her off her task. There's no need to punish her on my account."

Bobby shook her head resolutely. "No, she will have to pay the penalty this time. I have tried to take your

advice, but she only grows wilder and more unruly every time. I must get her back under control. I am very uneasy about her."

"Pulling her in won't help," said Silas. "And after all, what did she do? Merely repeated a sentence or two spoken by a lunatic. There's nothing to take seriously there."

"I am afraid I don't agree with you," said Bobby firmly. "I am very sorry. But I think her behaviour was outrageous."

"You are unreasonable," said Silas. "Why shouldn't she repeat it? Most people know the reason for Lord Ravencombe's objection to my family. There's nothing in it to be ashamed of, that I can see."

"I don't think I know it," said Bobby. "But please don't imagine that I am asking to know!"

"There's nothing about me that I wouldn't like you to know," said Silas with simplicity. "His grudge began with my father who married a cousin of his—the daughter of a younger branch—in the teeth of her family. Lord Ravencombe was saner in those days than he is now, but he never got over it."

"That was your mother?" asked Bobby.

"My mother, yes. I never saw her. She died when I was born. But I survived. That was an almost worse offence, I imagine." A grim note of humour sounded in Silas's voice. "However, I still survive."

"Then he is—a sort of cousin?" questioned Bobby.

"A thousand times removed, thank heaven!" said Silas. "It's a very distant relationship. My mother was the daughter of his first cousin whom—tradition says—he was wild to marry in his early days. And he adopted

my mother when her mother died and brought her up as his own daughter."

"And she failed him, too!" said Bobby. "That was sad."

He looked at her. "Yes, you would see it like that. It was sad, I suppose. But I fancy she was not unhappy while it lasted. My father worshipped her. He only married Peter's mother for convenience, though I suppose you would have said that she was a more suitable wife for him than Betty Thorgrave."

"Betty who?" said Bobby, and suddenly, unexpectedly, a great wave of colour that was like the glow of a flame spread over her as she stood facing him.

"Thorgrave," he said, "Thorgrave. Do you know the name?"

She spoke rather breathlessly. "Yes, I know it! But I didn't know—I never knew—they were related to Lord Ravencombe." She paused a moment; then: "It's all very long ago now," she said more quietly. "It was only the name that rather surprised me. It must have been another branch of the family that we used to know. So you are related to Lord Ravencombe!"

"I have that honour," said Silas very grimly. "But it is not one of which I am at all proud."

Her clear eyes expressed sympathy. "He is quite mad, I believe," she said. "I don't know much about him."

"Nor I," said Silas. He looked at her very directly. "Tell me what you know of the Thorgraves!" he said.

Bobby made a small movement as of backing away. "Oh, very little really," she said. "There was a man of that name in my father's regiment. He may not have been any relation at all. It's very long ago—nearly

twenty years. He went abroad and we lost sight of him. I think," her voice dropped a little, "he is probably dead." She turned with the words to lay her ironing on the dresser.

Silas was watching her, but he said nothing. There was something about her that pleaded for silence at that moment.

When she turned round again, she was smiling. "It would be funny, wouldn't it," she said, "if by any chance you stepped into the title?"

"I!" said Silas. A sudden growling note sounded in his voice. "Do you think I'd touch it—or anything whatever to do with it—after being despised all my life for being my father's son?"

"Oh, no, I don't indeed!" said Bobby, distressed. "Please forgive me for saying that! I didn't mean to hurt you."

His grimness passed. "I know that all right," he said. "You never mean to hurt anyone. That's the lovely part of you. Well," he picked up his cap, "I must be going. But I want you to consider that partnership question really seriously. You will, won't you?"

"Yes. I will—consider it," said Bobby dubiously.

His sudden smile showed itself. "Don't worry about it!" he said. "Just consider it! I shall stick to what I've said. I'll never pester you. It's business only. Everything will be on a legal basis. But don't forget you'll have much more time to look after Rosemary and keep her out of mischief if you consent!"

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Bobby. "And she's waiting for her tea! I'd forgotten!"

"Tea and a lecture!" said Silas at the door. "But if I

were you, I'd make her get the one for herself and let her off the other."

He tramped away, slamming the door behind him, and Bobby was left with a very thoughtful face to prepare the tea.

CHAPTER IV

GRIEVANCES

It might have been due to Silas's advice or to some other influence, but Rosemary escaped everything in the form of a lecture that night. She was sent to bed, it is true, but being heartily tired after her day's adventures, that was not to be regarded in the light of a hardship. And though her meal consisted only of bread and butter, she ate it with relish and was quite content. Bobby brought the tray, but she did not remain with her. She seemed preoccupied.

"I wonder what that farmer creature has been putting into her head now," was Rosemary's reflection as she nestled luxuriously into bed. But she was too sleepy to wonder for long, and when Bobby returned she was sunk in serene slumber, her golden head pillow'd boyishly on her arm.

Bobby paused to look at her, her eyes tenderly shining. Rosemary awake was a vivid and arresting picture of youth and beauty. Rosemary asleep was a dream of loveliness well nigh unsurpassable. The elder woman caught her breath as she bent over her, and a curious prayer came softly from her lips. "O God, don't let her get too lovely!"

There was a deep shadow on her own face, such a shadow as the world never saw, as she watched the sleep-

ing girl; but when Rosemary stirred, she drew back swiftly, and it was gone. She collected the tea-things deftly and crept away.

Matilda glanced up from a paper-pattern she was putting together on the parlour-table as she entered a little later. "Has that tiresome girl come back yet?" she asked.

"Yes, Rosemary is back," said Bobby. "I sent her to bed. She has been going hard all day."

"That's a good thing," said Matilda with satisfaction. "I can't bear her chattering round when I'm trying to think. Now look here, Bobby! Should you say this was part of the collar? They've numbered it all wrong."

Bobby came and gave her advice with her usual cheerful sympathy, though the matter was one which did not hold the faintest interest for her. In the days of their childhood, she and Matilda had been inseparable companions and neither had been happy without the other. Bobby thought of those days sometimes with a pang.

"And what had Farmer Hickory got to say this time?" enquired Matilda presently.

Bobby hesitated for a second; then: "He came round to talk about the red cow's calf," she said.

"Then what on earth did you ask him in for?" said Matilda suspiciously. "He wasn't talking calves when I heard him."

"No?" said Bobby indifferently.

Her sister turned unexpectedly upon her. "You think you can put me off with anything, don't you, Bobby?" she said. "But you can't. How much longer are you going to degrade yourself and me with this most humiliating flirtation?"

Bobby looked at her, her blue eyes very bright. "I

hope I am not degrading anyone," she said. "And I object to the term 'flirtation'. However, the whole subject is one which I refuse to discuss, so we need not argue about terms."

"You always refuse to discuss," grumbled Matilda. "But it doesn't alter facts. You know very well what that man is after, and you are secretly encouraging him."

Bobby picked up her work and began to stitch vigorously, her pretty mouth closed more firmly than usual.

But Matilda was not to be silenced. "I knew what would happen," she said, "when we came here and began to mix with that class of person. It is bound to tel' in the end. They always take advantage."

Bobby maintained her silence.

Matilda continued. "I always told you we should lose caste, and we have. What prospects has Rosemary of ever getting a standing among people of her own class? None. There is only that Hudson boy who will never have a penny to bless himself with, and that extraordinary friend of his who might be anything on earth."

She paused, but still Bobby said nothing.

Matilda took up the tale again. "And now that objectionable Farmer Hickory comes here every day, and you let him in and treat him as an equal. Upon my word, Bobby, I sometimes wonder how much longer I can possibly stand it."

There was a tremor of tears in her voice. Bobby looked up from her work.

"Matilda," she said very quietly, "you are making a great mistake. Silas Hickory may seem rough to you, but, as I have told Rosemary, he is a gentleman."

Matilda made a scornful sound.

"Yes, I know," said Bobby. "Because he farms his own land and is not ashamed of work, you despise him. But—for your comfort—" a note of unwonted irony rang in her voice—"let me tell you this! He is related through his mother to old Lord Ravencombe."

"Good gracious!" said Matilda. And then with a half-laugh, "Not legitimately of course!"

"Yes, legitimately," said Bobby, regarding her steadily. "The girl his father married was a cousin of Lord Ravencombe."

"Good gracious!" said Matilda again. "Are you going to tell me that he is the missing heir?"

"I know nothing about that," said Bobby. "There is probably someone closer. But the relationship exists, so will you please remember that Silas Hickory has as good a right as you or I to be treated with courtesy and consideration?"

Again the note of irony was in her voice, but Matilda passed it by. "It's very interesting," she said. "Who told you?"

"He told me," said Bobby, adding with sudden compunction, "I am not at all sure that I had any right to repeat it, so please keep it to yourself! It makes no difference whatever to my regard for him. I have always liked him and known him to be a gentleman."

"Oh, you!" said Matilda. "I quite realize you have got to justify yourself somehow. I don't of course flatter myself that anything I say will have any effect upon you, but if you were anyone else, I should say that your intentions were painfully obvious. As it is, I only say that you are very foolish and indiscreet. All the neighbourhood will get talking about you unless you are careful."

Bobby stiffened as she sat. "I am not afraid of that," she said.

"You're never afraid of anything till it happens," retorted Matilda. "I knew that this farming idea was a mad scheme. I always said so, but you would not listen."

"It's a living anyhow," said Bobby shortly.

"A living! You call it that!" The long-nourished bitterness of years was in Matilda's rejoinder. "If we took a house on the sea-shore and had lodgers it would be that. You have no pride left at all. I am not sure that you ever had much, but dealing with pigs and cattle has had a lowering effect upon you. You simply live for the farm and nothing else. As for me, I am a mere non-entity. No one ever treats me as anything else."

There was more than a grain of truth in this, and Bobby could not deny it. She said nothing as Matilda shed a few tears and resumed her work.

"I am sure I am not idle," pursued Matilda. "I am always busy at something when my wretched health will let me. I should probably be stronger and able to do much more if we did not live in this horrible damp place where there are no comforts of any description. Oh, why did I ever consent to come here, I wonder? I always knew it was a mistake, and the worst thing possible for Rosemary."

She flung the last sentence like a challenge, peevishly aware that Rosemary's fate meant considerably more to Bobby than her own.

Bobby, however, maintained her rather stoical attitude. These complaints of Matilda's were of periodical occurrence and had to be borne with. She would talk herself out eventually if left alone. It was the only common-

sense treatment for her. For to argue was to prolong the trial indefinitely, besides being a complete waste of time and effort.

She resigned herself therefore to silent endurance, and it was an unexpected relief when a few minutes later there came the sound of footsteps outside and someone knocked upon the outer door.

She got up to answer it.

"Don't bring anyone in here!" said Matilda.

"I will see who it is," said Bobby.

She went to the door and discovered the cross-grained Everett who lived along the road to Bode.

"Oh, it's you, Miss Roberta!" he said. "I'm in bad trouble to-night. The missis is took worse and the doctor's been sent for to Ravencombe, so there's no one to help. Could you come along and see her? She's mortal bad."

"I'll come of course," said Bobby instantly. "Come inside, Mr. Everett!"

She herself returned to the parlour and the cosy picture of Matilda with her feet in the fender for a moment.

"I'm just going round to poor old Mrs. Everett," she said. "She's worse, and they can't get hold of the doctor. I'll take the key with me. There are some sausage-rolls in the larder for supper in case I'm late back. Don't bother about Rosemary! She's asleep."

"So I'm to get the supper, am I?" said Matilda. "I must say, Bobby——"

Bobby interrupted her, kindly but firmly. "Only your own supper, my dear. You can manage that, can't you? I will make up the fire before I go, and I daresay I shan't

be very long. But don't wait up for me! One never knows. Good night!"

She passed on into the kitchen, closing the door behind her.

Matilda sat and listened to her rapid movements with aggrieved attention. How like Bobby to go off in that way! Always ready to look after outsiders, but her own sister never! She wondered if it were worth while to get up and lodge a protest, but decided that it was not. Bobby would certainly not heed her. She never heeded her now.

She also looked back across the long span of years that separated them from their childhood, and remembered how once they had been the closest friends. A petulant sigh escaped her. Why had Bobby grown away from her thus?

She listened for her departure, and when she heard her go, she gave herself up to a weak fit of resentment. Here was she, scarcely better than an invalid, condemned to get her own supper!

"I've a very good mind not to have any," she told herself tearfully. "If I died of starvation no one would care. As for Rosemary—is it likely I should bother about her?"

It was not in the least likely, and Bobby had been well aware that the injunction was superfluous when making it. Rosemary was the last person in the world for whom Matilda would have taken any trouble whatsoever. The only feeling she entertained for her was one of jealous irritation. And somehow her beauty was an added grievance. Beauty was completely wasted upon girls like Rosemary, and it would probably lead her into mischief sooner or later.

"Well, it's no affair of mine," said Matilda, drawing her chair nearer to the fire. "Bobby has made herself responsible for her, and I wish her joy."

With which kindly reflection she dismissed both Bobby and Rosemary from her mind and concentrated once more upon the arduous dress-making task upon which she was engaged.

CHAPTER V

PUNISHMENT

IT was as well that Bobby took the key, for she did not get home again till after one o'clock, and Matilda had long since gone to bed. It would not have gratified the latter to have known that Bobby was content to take her welfare for granted, but could not pass Rosemary's room without peeping in to make sure that her darling slept.

Having satisfied herself on this point, she retired to her own room—the smallest and meanest of them all, and went swiftly to bed. She was in fact almost too tired to undress, but she compelled herself to do so, being methodical in all her ways. She had said her prayers for the night long since while watching by Mrs. Everett's bed, and only the one petition remained to be whispered into the darkness as she lay down. They were always the last words upon her lips at the close of each day. "O God, bless my Rosemary, and keep her safe from all evil!" Then she sank into the three hours' rest which was all that remained to her.

She was up at her usual time in the morning, ready as ever for her daily task, betraying no signs of weariness, bent only upon fulfilling her work in time to accompany Rosemary to church, as had been her invariable custom every Sunday since they had come to Little Staple.

Rosemary awoke in a repentant mood, and came down earlier than usual to help her. When she heard of Bobby's vigil with Mrs. Everett, she was full of solicitude on her behalf.

"You must be frightfully tired," she said. "Darling Aunt Bobby, I wish I'd known. I'd have come too."

"That you certainly wouldn't, dear," said Bobby. "It wasn't such a bad attack this time, but they always get more frightened at night. I was glad to be with them, and it wasn't hard work at all."

"You always say that," said Rosemary, frankly incredulous. "Well, you must leave the farmyard to me this afternoon, and get in a rest. Yes, I insist upon that, dearest," borrowing Bobby's magisterial manner with chuckling effrontery. "I shall simply lock you in your room until you do."

Bobby did not smile at this piece of levity. Perhaps she was somewhat over-serious that morning as the result of the fatigue to which she would not own.

"Rosemary dear," she said, "if you really want to help me, you can do so only by submission and good behaviour. You were very headstrong and disobedient yesterday, and though Mr. Hickory was kind enough to intercede for you, I could not possibly pass over such conduct as yours."

Rosemary's eyes grew wide and dark. "He dared to intercede for me, did he?" she commented. "I always knew he had the cheek of the devil. (No, dear, I'm sorry. I ought to have said Old Nick, I know.) Well, I'd sooner do a dozen punishments than be let off at his request. Don't ever do anything he asks you, Aunt Bobby! I'm not wanting you to pass over anything. I'll learn the

beastly old Schiller. It'll keep me out of mischief in the long winter evenings, won't it?" A sudden dimple made its appearance at the corner of her mouth.

"I hope so," said Bobby, gravely overlooking it. "But you will not begin to-day of course, as it is Sunday."

"All right, Aunt Bobby." Rosemary spoke with sweet docility. "What would you like me to do to-day?"

"You may help me to-day," said Bobby, aware that a weak spot had been found in her armour. "But to-morrow—"

"Oh, don't let's talk about to-morrow!" begged Rosemary, smiling openly and winding a persuasive arm round her neck. "To-morrow never comes, does it? And it's such fun pretending it never will. Just fancy in twenty years' time, Aunt Bobby, how funny it will be if I'm still being naughty to Silas Hickory and you're still making me learn dear old Schiller!"

Bobby did not think the idea at all a funny one. "You are talking nonsense, dearest," she said. "You will be a very different person in twenty years—and so shall I."

"Heaven forbid!" said Rosemary, clasping her closely. "You may want to alter me, but I wouldn't have you different for all the world."

It was impossible not to soften to her. Bobby softened, and peace descended.

But it was very short-lived. Returning from church that morning, they found old Roper, the veterinary surgeon, red-faced and chubby-cheeked, awaiting them in the lane on his lanky grey who had the reputation for being able to jump every five-barred gate in the county.

"Ah, there you are!" was his greeting. "I had to come round this way on business so thought I'd mix in a little

pleasure with it. How d'ye do, Miss Roberta? Well, Miss Rosemary, and what's your latest mischief?"

Rosemary went straight to the grey whom she knew and clasped his long head fondly in her hands.

Bobby paused. "How nice of you to look us up, Mr. Roper!" she said. "I hope you are well?"

"Very well indeed, ma'am," said old Roper. "And I trust you're the same. Have you heard the latest?"

"What is the latest?" asked Bobby.

"Why, old Ravencombe!" said Roper. "He's dead at last! It's all over the countryside. Mean to say you've been to church and not heard that?"

"My hat!" said Rosemary, turning a little pale. "Why, I saw him only yesterday—for the first time. He was raving like mad. And now he's dead, is he? My hat!"

"What? You seen him?" said old Roper. "Where was that, then? I didn't think anybody was ever allowed to."

"At the meet," explained Rosemary. "I went trespassing up a side-path, and there he was in a chair—with his keeper. He was raving like anything. He looked as if he ought to have died centuries ago. How old was he?"

"Somewhere about ninety, I believe," said Roper. "Fancy you seeing him, little missie! Hope he didn't cast the evil eye at you. They do say he was possessed."

Rosemary shivered and laughed. "He looked as if he were. What'll happen now? Who's the heir?"

Old Roper shook his head. "Ask me another! There is an heir somewhere. That's all I know."

"Well, he won't inherit much," said Rosemary. "The place has simply gone to rack and ruin. It must have been very fine once. You know it, Aunt Bobby."

"No, dear, I have never seen it," said Bobby.

She spoke absently, as though her thoughts were elsewhere.

Rosemary turned back to the grey who was nuzzling against her coat.

"And what were you doing over there?" questioned Roper. "Went to the meet, eh? It was a long way for you."

"I got a lift in a car," said Rosemary. "We followed on foot, but we didn't see anything. The going was too fast."

"Ah!" said the old riding-master, smiling at her. "It's time you had another scamper after the hounds on horseback, Miss Rosemary. They're meeting over the other side of Bode on Saturday. Would you like a mount?"

"Oh, shouldn't I?" said Rosemary, with shining eyes. "Do you really mean it, Mr. Roper? I'll come like a shot."

Bobby suddenly came to earth and spoke with decision. "No, Rosemary dear. I am sorry, but I cannot allow any more all-day hunting until that task is finished."

"Aunt Bobby!" Rosemary turned upon her in amazement. "But, Aunt Bobby, not with Mr. Roper? Why, I shan't get another chance this season!"

"I am sorry," Bobby said again. "But I have said it, and I mean it. Thank you very much, Mr. Roper, for thinking of it. I wish it had been possible."

"But it is possible!" cried Rosemary, divided between wrath and dismay. "Oh, Aunt Bobby, you can't refuse me this! You simply can't! I haven't been out with Mr. Roper for ages, while as for a gallop after the hounds

—"

"My dear," said Bobby, "nothing will alter my decision. You have brought it upon yourself. I cannot give my consent after what passed yesterday. So will you thank Mr. Roper and say good-bye?"

"No, I won't!" stormed Rosemary, suddenly losing all dignity and self-control. "I'm going—I'll go whatever happens! So there!" She actually stamped in her fever of rebellion. "It's too absurd. It really is. Mr. Roper, I'll come with you! What time will you be round on Saturday?"

Roper shook his head at her and turned appealingly to Bobby. "Couldn't you think again—just for once, ma'am?" he said pleadingly. "I'll answer for it she don't get into any mischief. Come now! Couldn't you?"

But Bobby was adamant. "It is quite impossible," she said with resolution, and there was nothing in face or voice to show what that resolution cost. "Please do not think of coming round! It would be quite useless. My niece is very busy just now, Mr. Roper, and she will not have time. Thank you once more for the thought. Come, Rosemary dear, we must be getting home."

But Rosemary stood motionless, her face suddenly hidden against the face of the grey.

"There now!" said Roper. "Don't you take on, my dear! We'll manage something later on when you've more time. The skies won't fall just because you miss a run with the hounds, you know. Come, Miss Rosemary, let's see that pretty smile of yours! Your aunt knows best. Come!"

"Rosemary!" said Bobby.

Rosemary lifted her head with a jerk. She was very

white, but she sent a quivering smile upwards into Roper's face of kindly concern.

"Thank you, Mr. Roper! You're a brick," she said, and turned away very swiftly, almost running past Bobby in the rapidity of her escape.

Roper looked after her sympathetically; then he turned to Bobby. But something in the latter's face made him check the words he was about to utter. He put a hasty hand to his hat and averted his eyes.

"Good morning to you, Miss Roberta!" he said.

Bobby's reply was almost inaudible as she acknowledged his salute and went on up the muddy track after Rosemary's flying figure.

She did not overtake her, and when she reached Little Staple she was nowhere to be seen.

She went herself to the kitchen to put on the potatoes, then she looked into the parlour to see Matilda.

"What on earth is the matter with that tiresome child?" was her greeting. "She came into the house just now like a tornado. I thought there was something terrible the matter. But she tore upstairs to her room and banged the door, so I couldn't ask."

"Leave her alone!" said Bobby. "She will be better presently. Don't take any notice when you see her!"

"Have you had a quarrel?" asked Matilda curiously.

"No, dear, of course not. I have had to punish her for a fault, that's all." A faint note of weariness sounded in Bobby's voice with the words though she smiled reassuringly at her sister as she uttered them.

"It's a pity you can't give her a good whipping," said Matilda rather viciously. "If anyone ever deserved it, she does."

"I am afraid this is hurting her much more," said Bobby.

She began to lay the cloth, and Matilda took up a book.

"It's very cold," she remarked after a moment or two. "I wish you would break the coal a little smaller. It takes such ages to burn through. Put some on, will you, please? I can't do without a decent fire at least."

Bobby complied in silence, and finished setting the table.

"Are you going to take Rosemary's up to her?" asked Matilda.

"No. I am going to fetch her down," said Bobby, and turned to the door. "It is too cold for her to stay upstairs to-day."

"Ridiculous!" said Matilda. "Children don't know what cold means."

Bobby went up the oak stairs and paused outside Rosemary's door.

She heard sounds of her immediately. Rosemary was walking up and down like a caged animal with a wild and desperate sobbing that stabbed Bobby to the heart. She tried to open the door and found it locked.

She called softly. "Rosemary, let me in, darling! Open the door!"

Rosemary's tramping and sobbing ceased on the instant, and there fell a stillness that pierced Bobby's heart a little deeper.

"Unlock the door, child!" she urged. "I want to talk to you."

Rosemary's voice, rather high and intensely clear, came in answer. "No, thank you, Aunt Bobby. I'd rather be alone." She paused a moment, then added, "I don't want any dinner, thanks. Please don't bother to bring it!"

There was such finality in her speech that Bobby judged it best to take her at her word. She went away without further argument, but she felt as if her heart were bleeding. Rosemary had never locked the door against her before.

Matilda smiled somewhat sarcastically at the empty place at the table when they sat down. "She'll be tame enough presently," she said.

Bobby said nothing and scarcely touched the meal before her.

When it was over, she went to the kitchen to discharge her various duties while Matilda settled down for the nap before the fire so necessary to her health.

The day was cold and cheerless with a biting wind from the east and an overcast sky. The blast seemed to cut right through Bobby as she went out to feed the pigs, but she faced it bravely with her head up. It was no good doing anything else after all. But she carried a heavier burden than usual as she went about her work.

Returning from the poultry-field, an almost overwhelming lassitude came upon her so that she hardly knew how to drag one foot after the other. She fought it with all the strength that remained to her, but when she reached the barn she realized that her heart was beating oddly and she could go no further. Mechanically she set down her bucket and can, and sank on to the corn-bin to rest.

CHAPTER VI

YOUTH

FOR how long she sat there crouched in complete exhaustion she did not know. It was not sleep that came upon her, but a kind of stupor through which she was aware of that curious unevenness of her heart-beats and a strange sense of oppression that seemed to develop therefrom. But at length gradually the burden began to lift, and she raised her head with a guilty feeling of having suffered herself to give way. She could not remember that she had ever yielded thus weakly before and she was thoroughly ashamed. Wearily she got up from her lowly seat, but the next moment she reeled dizzily with closed eyes against the whitewashed wall. Her brain seemed to have turned fluid and she could not steady it. For a space she leaned there helpless; then with a supreme effort she gathered up the reins of her self-control. This was absurd. She took herself seriously to task. There was nothing whatever the matter, save that she was perhaps a trifle over-tired. She must get to bed early to make up for the previous night's shortage of sleep. Meantime she must go in and get the tea.

With this resolution firmly fixed she put away her things and left the barn.

Her limbs felt oddly weak and inclined to double under

her; but she compelled them to bear her. Such weakness was not to be permitted for another instant. Nevertheless, her progress was a somewhat unsteady one, and when she reached the gate that led from the farmyard to the garden she was glad to lean upon it for a brief respite. She had a basket of eggs in one hand, and this she deposited upon the ground; for she was shivering uncontrollably and could not trust herself to hold it.

The wind was cruelly keen in this particular spot, and she felt chilled to the bone. But she knew within herself that she lacked the strength to open the gate and go in. So for a further space she hung upon it, battling with the overwhelming inertia that held her.

It must have been nearly ten minutes later that a man's feet suddenly sounded in the yard behind her, and she started out of what was very nearly a state of semi-consciousness and began to fumble at the gate.

He came up through the dusk of the late afternoon and was close to her almost before she had realized his presence.

"I just walked down through the fields," he said, "to see if I could lend a hand as it's Sunday. What's the matter? Is the gate stuck?"

Then he reached her, and in a second his tone changed.

"Why, Miss Roberta—Bobby! What on earth's the matter? Are you ill?"

She answered him through lips that felt paralysed. "It—it's just the cold that has got hold of me. Could you—could you open the gate? It's so heavy."

"My dear!" said Silas. She felt the warmth of his body against her and had an odd little spasm of relief as he thrust his arm about her.

"Oh, I am cold!" she said.

"I'll take you in," said Silas, and pushed open the gate with a blow from his free hand.

"Mind my eggs!" said Bobby.

He gathered up the basket, still strongly upholding her. "Now walk!" he said. "Just walk! Don't think about anything else!"

She obeyed him blindly, leaving direction and all other considerations to him. Again it seemed to her that her knees would not bear her, but this time she was urged by a power greater than her own. As he guided her, so she went, till the farmhouse door rose up before her, and he lifted her over the doorstep into her kitchen.

And then she found herself sitting in a chair before the fire while he poked it vigorously into a blaze. By its light she saw his dark face almost forbidding in its gravity, and had a strange thought that he was rather like the Pluto of her childish fancies—a presence that could be sinister and yet in its way pathetic also.

He turned round to her and kneeling before her, his shoulders gigantic against the firelight, began to rub her hands. The awful rigour of cold that bound her relaxed as he did so, and she knew that her strength was returning.

"Thank you so much," she murmured gratefully; and a moment later, "Don't—please—let anyone know!"

Silas said nothing whatever. He only gathered up those frozen hands and pressed them against his neck, the while his dark eyes dwelt upon her with a kind of smouldering heat.

"I'm better now," whispered Bobby after a few moments. "Please don't worry about me any more! It

was very kind of you to come round, but I've finished everything. Cox can lock up when he comes."

He still held her hands, and she felt that he was quivering with some emotion that she had never seen in him before.

"Please!" she said softly.

He spoke, under his breath. "So I'm to go away and leave you to kill yourself, am I?"

She smiled at that; it was the only way to treat it. "Oh, don't be silly!" she said. "You mustn't, you know. I am quite all right. It was only the cold, and being a little tired."

She drew her hands gently from him with the words and prepared to rise. But he made a sudden movement that checked her. Still kneeling before her, he took her by the shoulders. His face was sterner than she had ever seen it, and there was that in his eyes which she found she could not meet.

"Bobby," he said, "how long is this tomfoolery to go on? When will you see reason?"

"I don't know," said Bobby rather weakly. He made her feel weak, holding her thus like a culprit before him.

"It's downright madness," Silas said, and though his voice was low, the force of him was like a storm-blast against which it was impossible to stand. "You'll have to give in. Bobby, why don't you? Why go on till you break down? It won't cost you anything. I have said it. Don't you believe me? Can't you trust me?"

"I don't know," she said again. She was not exactly frightened, but she felt at a disadvantage, overwhelmed, helpless.

"Who is going to benefit?" he pursued relentlessly.

"You say you can't afford to be ill? But what if you are ill already? You're overtaxing your strength every single day, and it won't last. What's going to happen then? If you won't let me lend a hand, who else is going to? Tell me that!"

"I don't know," whispered Bobby for the third time.

Her heart was beating strangely again, and she felt oddly scared and uncertain of herself. Silas in this mood was a formidable proposition, almost impossible to reckon with.

"Listen!" he said suddenly. "If you'll only agree to this thing, you'll be just as free as you are now. I'll never ask to know any of your secrets. Every woman has 'em, I suppose, and I've no wish or intention to pry. I shall never want to go beyond that private gate of yours. If it's that that's holding you back, wash it out! I'll never trespass, that I swear to you. Whatever you keep there, it's safe, so far as I'm concerned."

"Ah!" said Bobby. That moved her, seemed to pierce her. She put her hand to her side, and slowly the painful colour came up over her face, though she sought bravely to smile. For a moment or two, she sat so, as one on the verge of speech, yet holding back. Then a sound overhead attracted her attention, and she turned her head sharply to listen. "Oh, please will you go?" she said then, panting a little in her urgency. "Rosemary is coming down, and I can't—I can't have another scene with you here. Please, Silas, please will you go now? Forgive me for asking you to!"

"Forgive you!" said Silas. "Oh, you poor little soul! Poor little—martyr!"

He spoke the last word under his breath and with it his

hands tightened upon her as though he would draw her to him. Then abruptly he checked himself. There was the sound of a step on the stairs. He released her and stood up.

For a second he seemed too moved for further speech, then he bent over her, and she saw that the fire that shone in his eyes was lighted by sheer devotion.

"Don't forget I'm here!" he said rather hurriedly. "Always here and willing to help! Nothing on earth can make any difference to that as long as I live!"

There was emotion in the low-spoken words, such emotion as stirred her deeply. It was as though he had uttered a solemn oath before her.

She reached forward and touched his hand in answer. There was no time for more. Rosemary was almost at the door, but ere she entered he had swung away and gone by the outer door through which he had come.

Bobby commanded herself and got up, still panting slightly. When Rosemary came in, she was busy over the fire.

The girl moved slowly, as if tired out. She reached Bobby's side and stood still.

"Aunt Bobby!" she said.

"Well, dear?" said Bobby.

It was in her heart at the sound of that spent voice to turn and put her arms round her, but she refrained. Rosemary must be conquered this time.

"I want to tell you something," pursued Rosemary. "Will you listen to me a minute?"

Bobby turned towards her. They stood and faced one another in the firelight. "What is it, dear?" she said.

Rosemary's eyes were heavy with weeping. She looked

like a broken-hearted child, and Bobby's own heart urged her again to tenderness. But she would not yield.

"Well, Rosemary?" she said.

"I just want to say this," said Rosemary. "You have hurt me—terribly."

"My dear," said Bobby, stifling those inner promptings with desperate effort. "I meant to hurt you."

Rosemary winced. "You have no right—" she began, and checked herself abruptly. "No, I shouldn't say that, I suppose. Everyone who brings up children thinks they have a right to go on controlling them after they are grown up. But—"

"You are not grown up, darling," said Bobby with gentle conviction.

"You will never allow that I am," said Rosemary in the same dead tone. "But I have got to be allowed to grow up some time. I shall be eighteen very soon, and I can't stand being treated as if I were only eight any longer. You left off whipping me because I got too big, not because I never deserved it any more. You will have to leave off punishing me for the same reason."

"My dear," said Bobby very decidedly, "I shall punish you as often as you deserve it. Now, will you move and let me get the tea?"

But Rosemary stood motionless. "I haven't finished," she said. "Aunt Bobby, you're making a mistake. You're doing it out of love, I daresay, but that doesn't make it any better. I've got to grow up, whether you try to hold me back or not. I've got to have room to grow, freedom of action and thought. Girls of my age—heaps of them—are out in the world, making their own living. I have never seen the world yet. I've got to see it. I mean to

see it!" A sudden quiver of passion forced itself through the dreary flatness of her voice. "I'm going out into it to make my own living like the rest."

"You are talking great nonsense, dear," said Bobby patiently. "In another six or seven years perhaps we will discuss this question. But certainly not yet."

"We are going to discuss it now!" said Rosemary, and what had been a mere quiver in her voice rang out in open challenge. "In another six or seven years, the best time for work—the starting time—will be over. I won't wait till I'm twenty-five before I begin to live. I'm going to live now! If you try to hold me in, well, I shall break away, that's all. I shall simply have to. And—and it won't be my fault, Aunt Bobby. It'll be yours!"

The words were spoken—words over which she had been brooding for hours. She stood pulsing with excitement, all her girlish face aglow with it—the impassivity dropped from her like a garment.

"Rosemary!" said Bobby.

Her voice held a deep reproach, but she said no more than that. It was not the moment for speech, and she realized it. This quivering eager child was all alive for the sparkling draught of life, and though she knew she must withhold it, she would not face an open conflict just then. She saw that Rosemary was strung up for conflict, and for that very reason she forebore. By patient insistence when the fire had died down, not by a desperate battle of wills, could she hope to gain the day.

Rosemary winced again at the pain in the beloved voice. She had known that the struggle would cost a good deal, but to yield now was to lose everything. She dared not give ground.

"I can't help it," she said. "I don't want to hurt you. It's hurting me too. But it's got to be faced somehow. I'm not a child any longer. I'm a woman. You were not a child at my age, and I know you didn't wait till you were twenty-five to grow up. Why, you—you were engaged when you were nineteen,—just a year older than I am now."

"Rosemary!" Bobby's voice was no longer tender; it had a ring of sternness. "I will not have this from you. I don't know what has come to you during these last few days, but I will have no more of it. When you are sorry, I will listen to you; but not before."

"Sorry!" flung back Rosemary. Her slender figure stiffened with the word, and in the leaping firelight her eyes shone like blue flames. "Sorry—when I'm fighting for my freedom and for everything in life worth having! Oh, Aunt Bobby, how can you misunderstand so hopelessly? Surely you are not so old that you have forgotten?"

Bobby was facing her, but as a new strength seemed to enter into Rosemary, her own strength seemed to wane. She went back a step and leaned her hands upon the wooden back of the chair from which she had just risen.

She did not speak at once, and when she did, her voice came almost in a whisper. "My dear," she said, "I don't think I can discuss this any further now. Perhaps you are right. Perhaps I am getting old. Anyhow—" her voice had a piteous note—"I can't go on."

"Aunt Bobby!" Rosemary was close to her in an instant. "What is it? Aren't you well?"

Bobby drew back from her. It was her final effort. "I

am not ill," she said, "but I am tired. Light the lamp, dear, and we will have tea."

"You are tired!" said Rosemary, compunction mingling with half-startled doubt in her voice. She had never heard such an admission from Bobby before. "But of course you are tired after last night."

"After to-day!" corrected Bobby gently.

"I know," said Rosemary hastily. "I've been a beast. But—Aunt Bobby—it isn't all beastliness that has made me say what I have. Do believe that, won't you? Don't—don't be angry with me for growing up!"

Bobby's arms came out to her. She could no longer deny the impulse. But as Rosemary went into them with a passionate warmth and clasped her fiercely close, she murmured soft words over her that went straight to the girl's heart.

"My darling, don't be angry with me either for wanting to keep you safe! My precious baby girl! My Rosemary!"

CHAPTER VII

PERCY

THE days that followed were singularly quiet. To Bobby's great relief, Rosemary made no attempt to re-open the discussion which had so distressed her on that dark Sunday afternoon. She herself returned to her normal ways, and though she realized that the girl was subdued and unusually silent she judged it to be the result of a supreme effort to be good and to make amends for her wild outburst. The brief rebellion was evidently over, and Bobby was very thankful. She had no time or energy to spare for these devastating struggles; and though her heart ached over the necessity to curb and discipline her darling, she would not appear to notice her lack of spirits lest the flame should rekindle. She went back into her groove of daily pressing cares and duties and became apparently engrossed in them, the while Rosemary with outward submission accepted her punishment.

She spent hours every evening poring over her German play, and often her eyes were heavy with fatigue and misery, but Bobby would not see. She was very gentle with her at all times, but she would not remit the sentence. She dared not show weakness in this respect. Rosemary must be made to learn obedience and self-control. Only so could she be made fit to encounter the

trials and temptations of life. That her methods were severe she fully realized, but they sprang from the desperate desire to safeguard her treasure—a motive around which her whole life seemed to be bent. She would not suffer Rosemary to go to bed until her task for the day was finished, but neither would she go herself. She would sit with her, silently mending, till the appointed portion was mastered and could be repeated without a mistake.

They had no time for intimate talk in those days, and that also was in a way a relief to Bobby. Her intense physical weakness had subsided, but she found it very difficult to maintain her usual cheery energy. Like Rosemary, she was the victim of unwonted depression, and her sleep had become fitful and unrefreshing. There were times when a heavy sense of foreboding weighed her down, for which there was no accounting. Tiny lines which had never shown before had begun to gather about her eyes and brow. In repose her face was no longer serene, but wistful and sometimes anxious. She looked as if some secret trouble were gnawing at her soul. Neither Rosemary nor Matilda noticed the change in her, both being too deeply engrossed in their own affairs. But undeniably it was there,—a subtle creeping change not to be defined.

Silas would have noted it, but his opportunities had been curtailed by a note written by Bobby on the evening of that self-same Sunday which had been so severe a trial to her strength.

"Dear Mr. Hickory," (thus ceremoniously it ran) "I want to thank you for your great kindness to me to-day, and for your more than kind offer of partnership. I have con-

sidered it very carefully, as you desired, but I find it quite impossible to avail myself of it. Please do not think me ungracious or in any way unappreciative when I say that I feel that my only course is to go on as I am now doing, and I do beg that you will not attempt to dissuade me from it, for my decision is quite final. I am of course always pleased to discuss farm matters with you, but please when we meet let it be for business only, and not more often than business demands. I hope this request will not seem to you unreasonable. I feel compelled by circumstances to make it.

With my renewed thanks,

Yours sincerely,
ROBERTA WENDHOLME."

Silas's reply to this had been contained in one sentence, wholly unceremonious.

"I accept your decision without reservation till further notice. S. H."

Bobby had puckered her brow over that sentence, as if something in it had pained or bewildered her, and the tiny crumple had remained like a shadowy cloud on her bright face. She had seen nothing of Silas Hickory since.

Mary had come up one day, and had sat in the kitchen and talked, but her conversation had been completely commonplace and she had scarcely mentioned Silas. Peter was much more of an every-day topic with her, and Peter had only just escaped being tossed by the big bull. He said it was only play, but she was by no means sure that he was right.

When she had gone again, Bobby found that she had left her handkerchief behind, and in the morning she sent

Rosemary down with it. Whenever the sun shone now, she made Rosemary go out on one pretext or another, for she could not bear that white, imprisoned look that came over her face at night. The strange part was that Rosemary did not seem to want to go out, and her interest in Jess and her pups had waned to nothingness.

"I will go if you like, Aunt Bobby," was all she ever said when Bobby devised some errand to take her out into the sunshine.

On the day of the Rummage Sale, which was the Saturday on which Roper had invited her to hunt, Bobby took her down with her to the Parish Room to help in the great sorting of rubbish which annually took place there. Rosemary went without enthusiasm, but she made herself quite useful in a detached and uninterested fashion, until Percy Hudson came suddenly upon the scene and greeted her with a derisive whoop of welcome.

"I say, you're not going to waste your time over selling this mouldy collection, are you?" he questioned as he reached her. "Oh, chuck it and come out with us for a spin! The Old Bean's just outside."

Rosemary's face lighted up as Bobby had not seen it for days, but it sobered again almost immediately. "Afraid I'm busy, Percy," she said.

"Rats!" said Percy. "It is rats, isn't it, Miss Wendholme?" appealing to Bobby. "You don't want her here, now do you?"

He spoke coaxingly, waylaying Bobby as she lifted an armful of old clothes out of a box.

She gave him a smile. Everyone smiled at Percy. "I think it is too cold for motoring in the open," she said.

"I'll wrap her up," said Percy. "I've got a spare coat.

At least, The Old Bean has. He always takes spares of everything. Do let her come, I say! I'll bring her back in good condition, I promise."

Rosemary said nothing. She was bent over some price-tickets.

Bobby set down her bundle and looked at her. "Would you like to go, Rosemary?" she said.

Rosemary stood up. The eagerness flashed back into her face. "I should love it!" she said.

"Come on then!" said Percy. "Leave all this rubbish and come along!"

"May I, Aunt Bobby?" said Rosemary.

Bobby felt a swift pang at her heart. There was something of the caged bird about the throbbing appeal. She could not have refused it had she tried.

"Yes, go, darling!" she said. "It'll do you good. Wear the extra coat and be back for lunch!"

Rosemary flung her arms impulsively round her neck. "Oh, thank you!" she breathed. "Good-bye!"

She was gone like an arrow as though she feared the permission might be rescinded if she lingered, Percy looking back to promise to take care of her, in answer to Bobby's earnest request.

Outside the Parish Room, The Old Bean, standing by his two-seater car, greeted Rosemary with a beaming face. "This is slap-up!" he declared with enthusiasm. "What on earth have you been doing all this week? We nearly came to look for you, but didn't quite dare."

"Native caution prevailing," laughed Percy. "Here, give us that coat of yours, Old Bean! Not the one you've got on, silly! The other one—the spare! Where is it?"

The Old Bean, however, divested himself of the one

he was wearing, which was of the heavy blanket variety, and held it for Rosemary to put on.

"You have this one!" he said. "It's better than the one in the back."

She accepted without protest, anxious only to be gone.

"Who's going to drive?" said Percy.

"I am," said The Old Bean, pulling on the dilapidated "spare." "You jump into the dickey, unless you want to be left behind!"

"Well, I got her, anyway," maintained Percy, as he complied. "I bet you'd never have faced all that crowd of old women by yourself."

"Oh, do let's start!" cried Rosemary, literally dancing with impatience. "Get in, Old Bean! You can think of what to say afterwards."

He got in obediently and she swiftly followed. In another five seconds, they were splashing in and out of the puddles down the village street and Rosemary was laughing merrily for the sheer joy of freedom.

"It's been a rotten week," she said. "Thank goodness it's over!"

But when The Old Bean wanted to know in what its rottenness had consisted she would not tell him. She was bent upon enjoying her liberty to the utmost while it lasted.

They ran through the market-town of Bode and on through Foley Down where the hounds had met that morning.

"We're too late for the meet," said The Old Bean, "but we may see something of them."

"Oh, don't let's bother about the hounds!" begged

Rosemary. "Let's just go as far as ever we can before we have to turn back!"

He looked at her through his glasses which made his eyes seem greener than they actually were. Then he pressed the accelerator without comment, and they shot forward over the shining wet road, while Rosemary laughed again in sheer, delirious enjoyment.

It was Percy presently who called a halt when they were several miles on the other side of Bode. He did not feel that he was getting his fair share of their guest, especially as his acquaintance with Rosemary was of considerably longer standing than The Old Bean's.

They came to a stand on a wide furze-covered common over which the sea-gulls were flying in the fitful sunshine with plaintive cries.

"What a heavenly place!" said Rosemary. "And it smells of the sea too. We can't be very far away from it."

"We're not," said The Old Bean. "Foley Beacon is only about six miles farther on. I thought perhaps we might get as far if we stuck to it."

"We can't, then," said Percy. "She's got to be back to lunch, haven't you, Rosemary?"

"Afraid I have," she said reluctantly.

"There's some chocolate in one of those pockets," said The Old Bean. "I suppose that wouldn't do instead?"

"Oh, it isn't that," said Rosemary. "I'd go without lunch and tea and supper too if I could stay out. But I mustn't. Aunt Bobby would be fussing."

"Well, let's have the chocolate anyway!" said Percy. "I'm famished. It's beastly draughty at the back here, Old Bean. You can have it going home."

"Very well," said The Old Bean, "if Rosemary has no objection to your driving."

Rosemary objected to nothing. She was thoroughly enjoying herself. There was a subtle pleasure also in feeling that they were vying with each other to get the most of her. It was a novel experience and a very gratifying one.

They all sat in the sunshine and ate The Old Bean's chocolate with a good deal of merriment; then The Old Bean climbed into the dickey-seat and Percy took his place at the wheel.

She realized at once that he was a far less experienced driver than The Old Bean, and for a little while she was inclined to regret the exchange. But, like Percy, she exulted in speed, and very soon his recklessness had her spell-bound. The Old Bean, huddled in the background, blue with cold, wholly ceased to count.

All that had been pent up in her during the past week seemed to find vent in that wild rush homewards. The very blood was singing in her veins when, awaking to the fact that they were nearing Bode and the end of their run, she begged Percy to slow down lest they should get in before their time.

"Better be ten minutes late than early!" she urged.

"Right ho!" said Percy, reducing speed obligingly.

It was just as well, for to have rushed through Bode at that pace would have been to ask for trouble. As it was, their progress through the town was as sedate as the most exacting could have desired and they reached the open country again without incident.

"What are you going to do for Christmas?" asked Percy suddenly.

"Do?" Rosemary looked at him with round eyes of scorn. "Same as usual, I suppose. What do we ever do besides breathe?"

He laughed. Rosemary's retorts always amused him. "Well, what about this Boxing Day show at Bode? It'll be something of an event, I hear. And if you're still game——"

"Of course I'm game!" said Rosemary.

He leaned slightly towards her. "Well, don't tell The Old Bean, because he's off it. He's a bit of an aunt, you know. We'll do as we said. I'll come round and pick you up—about nineish, what? I'll wait for you at the end of the lane. And then we'll go off and have an almighty spree. How's that?"

Rosemary's eyes had the living fire of jewels. "Percy!" she breathed. "How—heavenly!"

He laughed again at her. Her vivid, arresting eagerness lent spice to the adventure.

"Right ho!" he said. "Then that's settled. To-day week, isn't it?"

"To-day week!" cried Rosemary, and her laughter had the wild sweetness of a stringed instrument touched unawares.

Percy gave her a swift side-glance and drove on.

CHAPTER VIII

CHRISTMAS

CHRISTMAS that year was, as Matilda said, a failure. To begin with, she herself was in bed, this time with a cold that really did threaten to become serious. Dr. Bel-lamy of Bode, summoned by Cox on Christmas Eve, warned Bobby that an absolutely warm and even temperature must be maintained in her room, and this necessitated Bobby sleeping on a couch at the foot of the invalid's bed to keep the fire alight. This she did with complete good temper though it meant that her own night must of necessity be a very broken one. For Matilda was not of those who hesitate to take full advantage of such a situation, and her demands upon Bobby's services were much more frequent and imperious than those of the fire. Time after time her querulous voice summoned the uncomplaining sister to her side, to pour out the medicine at her elbow, to bathe her forehead, to rearrange the bed-clothes, till even when reluctantly she fell asleep herself, all desire for slumber had deserted the patient Bobby, and she merely lay wide-eyed, watching the fire, until morning broke chill and grey to bring her another day of work.

It was pitilessly wet and cold, and she shivered as she crept downstairs to light the kitchen fire. Her own face, reflected in one of her shining dish-covers, looked pinched and blue, but there was no one about to notice that, and a cup of tea made a lot of difference.

She had planned to go to an early service, but with Matilda on her hands she knew that this was out of the question, and, since Rosemary never went without her, she did not go up to call her any earlier than usual. Matilda was sleeping quite comfortably, but she could not trust her to do so for any length of time and she knew that she would be bitterly reproached if she were not at hand when she awoke.

But she slipped out, nevertheless, to feed the pigs and poultry, shivering afresh as she went forth into the wet gloom of the early morning upon her errand.

The last thing she expected upon reaching the barn was to encounter the burly figure of Silas Hickory very obviously waiting for her.

He came to meet her with a purposeful stride and spoke before she had time to protest.

"I want the keys, please. I'll see to everything. It's what I've come for. And the hot chicken-food! Thanks! Now will you go straight back into the house and stay there!"

It was not a request. It was a definite command, and while he spoke he was taking everything she held from her with a rock-like intention to which she fully realized that it was useless to oppose herself.

"I haven't come to see you," he said. "I've come to do the work, that's all, and I shall be round this afternoon to do it too. Now please go straight in! You're looking rotten. And there's no sense in your getting ill too. As you say, you can't afford to."

His grim speech was quite irresistible. Bobby abandoned all attempts to assert herself. Meekly she surrendered everything to his management.

"It's very, very kind of you," was all she found to say. To which remark Silas made no response of any description.

When she was back in her own kitchen she remembered that it was Christmas Day and wished that she had given him a suitable greeting, but reflected that his appearance had been so forbidding that she would scarcely have dared to offer it. She laughed to herself rather weakly over the episode since she discovered that for some unknown reason she would have preferred to cry, but the unexpected leisure gave her time to pull herself together, and when she went up to Rosemary's room she had quite regained her self-command.

She found the girl already up and dressing and eager to help. She was surprised to hear that the outside work was finished, but Bobby gave no explanation. She was not answerable to Rosemary. They had an early breakfast together and she gave her a trifling gift of handkerchiefs to mark the day. She was somewhat touched when Rosemary responded with a cake of scented soap which she had bought out of her very slender monthly allowance because Aunt Bobby never indulged in such a luxury herself. No gifts ever passed between Rosemary and Matilda, but Bobby had kept up old custom and when she carried up her breakfast-tray it was decorated with a dainty lavender-sachet of her own making. Of course, as Matilda remarked, it was rather a farce to keep Christmas at all out in the wilds. She was not attempting to do so herself since it only made her feel more wretched, but if it gave Bobby any gratification she would certainly put her little offering among her linen.

"That is just what it is meant for," said Bobby with her cheery smile.

There was no question of going to church in the morning, for Matilda would not hear of being left for so long, and Rosemary fought so hard against being sent alone that Bobby gave up the contest with a sigh. Somehow, though she severely blamed herself for her slackness, it did not seem worth a struggle. She was sure that Rosemary would not come back any the better for having been sent against her will. She could not, however, be with her much, for Matilda was in one of her most exacting moods, and the only way of pacifying her was to give in. And so the whole of her morning was spent between the sick-room and the kitchen, and she scarcely knew how Rosemary was employing her time. She attended to Dobbin and to Jess and her family, but beyond that Bobby somewhat lost sight of her.

"It is dull for the child," she said to herself as she laid the table for their midday meal together. "Just when everyone else is having such a gay time!"

Silas' offer of partnership came before her, and for a few minutes she reviewed the possibilities he had suggested. To have time to be with her Rosemary, to give her those opportunities for amusement which till then had been so completely inaccessible, to be a real companion to the child so that those wild outbursts which were simply the result of an eager nature thrown upon itself might never occur again, to mould her day by day until she grew up into a gracious and happy womanhood, to watch over her and guide her till all danger was past, perhaps to see her at last happily settled in life! A great sigh burst from Bobby, and again she was acutely con-

scious of a longing to sit down and cry. For it was all hopelessly out of reach. She could not accept this thing from Silas, even though he had made that rugged promise that he would not seek thereby to further his suit. She could not place herself thus under his care. She ought not even to allow him to feed her pigs for her. It was true that she could not very well help it, but the sense of guilt remained. In so doing, she was taking that which she could never repay and violating one of the leading principles of her life.

Resolutely she turned her thoughts away. Not even for Rosemary could she incur any further obligation. Silas was a man of iron will, and she knew already that that will of his ringed her round, even though it might never close upon her. She believed that he was supremely honest, and that he had every intention of keeping his promise to her, but she had a curious feeling that it was not with Silas alone that she had to reckon. That strange physical weakness which had troubled her of late had made her begin to doubt herself. She had barely held her own with Rosemary. How would it be if circumstances combined to weaken her still further? She had always thought that she could stand alone, but now—oddly she asked herself the question—was she really such a tower of strength as to be invulnerable to all attack? Could she really expect always to be able to cope with the ever-increasing burden of responsibility thrust upon her? Might not a time come, be even now approaching, when her powers would begin to falter and at length to fail? Something was happening to her already. Perhaps it was old age! She smiled wanly at the thought. It was one of the contingencies that she had never allowed for.

But she realized it now as a definite possibility. She had recognized for a long time that life had been much easier when Rosemary was a child, and had ascribed the growing difficulties of late years to her inevitable development. But was it not equally the fact that she herself had left the golden morning-time behind her? Could she ever summon now even a faint afterglow of the radiant youth which once had been hers? Was she not in truth growing old, tired, jaded?

The vision of Silas came back upon her suddenly, like a weapon of defence swiftly grasped. She saw again the fire in his eyes—the impulsive movement, sternly checked, to draw her nearer. And she was conscious of a warmth spreading through her with the memory. But yet again resolutely she turned her thoughts aside. She had no right to view his devotion thus. He probably saw in her something that was wholly invisible to everyone else, something which quite probably existed in his imagination alone. He did not know—how could he?—that the thing he sought to grasp was but a shadow, that no answering fire could ever kindle in response to his, that the relish of life had utterly gone from her with the long, long drudgery of the years and the pitiful weariness of a waiting that had been in vain.

A great lump rose unexpectedly in her throat, and she stood up quickly and turned her back to the window, for her eyes were full of tears. Desperately she fought for self-control, knowing even while she fought that her powers of resistance were not what they had been, feeling as if some hidden opponent were beating them down. But in the end she mastered herself; for Rosemary must not find her thus. Rosemary had never come into actual

touch with this unaccountable weakness, and it must of necessity be kept from her at all costs. All hope for the future seemed to hang upon that.

And so when Rosemary came in a little later she found her bravely smiling and no suspicion that any cloud had arisen to dim that sunny serenity entered her head. As a matter of fact she did not give much thought to Bobby. Her thoughts were wrapped up deep within herself, as was so often now the case, and when she spoke it was absently and without interest. Like Matilda she regarded Christmas as a farce to be ignored as far as possible. It was useless to pretend to a jollity she did not feel. She even, when the meal was over, took out her Schiller and sat down in the chimney-corner to con her task, though Bobby sought to stay her with a loving hand upon her shoulder.

"What, to-day, dearest! Surely not to-day!"

Rosemary did not raise her eyes. "I may as well," she said. "Why not? There's nothing else to do."

True beyond disputing! Bobby turned away without further words. In earlier years they would have played some childish game together, and the hours would have flown unnoticed. But childish games were over now. She could not even suggest them. Rosemary had grown up.

Also, there was Matilda to be thought of,—poor, grumbling Matilda lying alone upstairs. It came to her with a pang that Matilda's need of her was greater than Rosemary's.

She quietly set the kitchen in order and went upstairs to sit with her.

CHAPTER IX

THE DREAM

EVEN Bobby breathed a sigh of relief when that Christmas Day came to an end and she settled down to another night on the couch in Matilda's room. She had not seen Silas again though she had heard his step in the yard and had known that he was attending to her duties according to his promise. Somehow it had seemed best to leave him alone and let him have his way. She had no strength for argument.

Matilda's cold was better, and the bronchial symptoms had almost subsided. She was thankful that this was so, but for some reason Matilda was not. She observed peevishly that she supposed now she would be left to her own devices to get over the attack as best she could, and for a good hour Bobby had to lie and listen to her plaints. But she talked herself to sleep at last, and peace descended. Bobby also sank into slumber.

She awoke very suddenly about one o'clock with a curious feeling of having been aroused, though she was not aware of any sound which could have disturbed her. The fire was burning evenly and slowly; she had stoked it scientifically before lying down, and it would not need attention for some time. Matilda was sleeping peacefully as she had slept for the past two hours, and the whole house seemed quiet and normal. Yet she found

herself fully awake and conscious throughout her whole being that something had happened to make her so. Some influence—it might have been telepathy—had stirred her sleeping brain, and she was alert and listening, just as though a voice had spoken in the room.

She sat up, gazing all about her into the shadows. The nightlight on the table beside Matilda's bed threw a small ghostly circle of light. By it she saw her sister's sleeping face, its beautiful outline flawless against the pillow, unmarred by the fretting seams of her daily life; and for many moments she remained motionless, watching it with eyes of deep compassion. Was it something in Matilda that had called to her—some memory of their past fashioned by a dream?

She could not tell, yet as she watched, memories arose within her of those girlish days that they had shared together, inseparable companions and *confidantes*, and something of the old devotion stirred in her heart. Had she begun to grow hard of late in her dealings with Matilda? Was the strenuous life she led making her curt and unsympathetic? With Rosemary also, was she so sacrificing herself to supply the needs of the body as to have no time left to provide for those of the soul?

A sharp pang that was like a physical stab went through her, and she put a hand to her throat. Had she indeed failed them both, while giving them all that she had?

Her thoughts left Matilda to return to her younger and infinitely more precious charge. She lay down again in the dimness, brooding tenderly over her beloved one, striving with anxious foreboding to pierce the future. But weariness came upon her as she lay, and her thoughts

grew confused and fantastic. She drifted once more into sleep.

For a space she seemed to hover on the edge of a deep repose, then those thoughts of hers became active again, and as though a fire had kindled at the back of her brain she saw them take monstrous shape, like shadows flung upon a wall. Vivid yet strangely distorted, her vision grew, till the face of Rosemary rose before her, and she gazed spell-bound, as one who looks into the future. Such was her dream, she saw naught but that girlish face; yet was she tragically aware of other things about it and beyond, shapes that came and went in indistinguishable confusion upon that lurid screen, voices that seemed to mock and die away ere she could grasp their meaning.

But through it all remained the clear vision of her darling's face, and on that face she read the interpretation of her dream as though it had been words upon a scroll.

At first, it was the Rosemary she knew, the gay, careless girl with the laughing eyes that looked down upon her, but very gradually it changed. She saw a curious troubled wonder dawn, an incredulous expression of disillusionment through which the laughter still sought to linger. Trembling, she watched the laughter fade, wiped out as it were by an unseen, ruthless hand. And in its place she saw fear—a startled, swift-rising horror—grow, dilating the innocent eyes, driving out the last lingering gaiety of youth.

When that happened she tried to rise and go to her, but, as though iron fetters bound her, she was powerless to move. She could only lie and watch,—see the horror turn to anguish, to a tortured fruitless striving to escape,

finally fading to a dreadful greyness of despair more terrible than suffering itself.

And through it all she was conscious of forms and voices, sometimes near, sometimes far, never wholly distinguishable, like the scarcely-seen background of a tapestry upon which a vivid tragedy was portrayed.

In the end came darkness, and with it the urgent need to fight against her bonds. The awful inertia was still upon her, but she struggled against it in a sort of frenzy, freeing first one limb and then another, until at last she burst upwards like a diver rising to the surface, and found herself on her feet and gasping in the middle of the room.

At the same instant came Matilda's voice, fretfully distinct, banishing her terrors. "Oh dear, oh dear, Bobby! What is the matter? Are you quite mad, I wonder?"

With a swift effort Bobby collected herself; but she was cold from head to foot and trembling violently.

"It's quite all right, Matilda. I am so sorry. Go to sleep again!"

"I haven't been asleep yet," complained Matilda. "You've been moaning in your sleep in the most horrible way. I do wish you would show a little more consideration. It really is most unfair."

"I'm sorry, dear," Bobby reiterated meekly. "I'll make up the fire, shall I, and then you won't be disturbed again?"

But Matilda, now that she was aroused, wanted more than that in the way of attention. The bed needed a thorough rearranging. She must have *eau-de-cologne* for her head. Her feet were cold. Would Bobby please reheat the water in her bottle? Also, a little warm milk

might be a help to her since it was so evidently going to be a sleepless night.

Without a word, Bobby set herself to satisfy these various needs, well knowing that it was the only way to secure peace. For nearly half-an-hour she busied herself with ministrations to her sister, and though her trembling ceased her heart was icy-cold within her. She felt as though it were a vision and not a dream upon which she had gazed.

When all was done at length, and Matilda, unable to think of any further needs, was actually growing drowsy again, she sat down before the newly-replenished fire and tried to draw a little warmth into her being.

But the inner coldness persisted. Her very soul felt ice-bound. And when presently Matilda's quiet breathing announced the fact that she slept, she rose very stealthily and crept to the door. She knew that she would never melt that awful chill until she had satisfied herself that Rosemary was safe.

The door creaked on its hinges as she opened it, but Matilda did not awake. She left it unlatched and stole out into the dark passage.

Rosemary's room was at the end, and as she felt her way towards it, she had a sudden shock. There was a faint streak of light visible under the door.

For a moment the discovery almost overwhelmed her. She stopped, unconsciously clutching at her heart. Then, controlling herself, she crept on again. The child must have fallen asleep with her light still burning. She would slip into the room and put it out without disturbing her.

She reached the door and felt for the latch. Softly

she raised it and pushed. The door resisted her. Once again it was locked against her.

She lowered the latch again and paused, uncertain. What should she do? There was no movement to be heard in the room. Or stay! Was there the sound of a caught breath—a stealthy rustle—the faint creak of a board pressed by a bare foot?

It was possible that she imagined these things. She knew that her nerves were wrought up to a pitch that might easily cause self-deception. But the locked door troubled her. She felt she could not go back to her own couch without satisfying herself that Rosemary slept. And there was the danger of a flickering candle also to be considered. Rosemary was often careless in little things, and it might be close to the bed.

The thought tortured her; yet still she stood in the icy passage, hesitating, unwilling to take action, unwilling to retreat. She had begun to shiver uncontrollably again. A gust of wind blew whistling round the old house and she felt chilled to the bone.

"I must go," she whispered to herself, but still she lingered, the memory of her vision holding her.

Finally, rousing herself to effort, she raised her hand in the darkness and softly tapped.

In that instant the light in the room went out. There was no sound save that very faint tapping of hers and the distant moan of the wind as it passed. But she stood in total blackness. The streak had vanished.

For a space she remained there motionless, straining every nerve to listen. But utter silence reigned beyond that locked door, and she even began to ask herself at length if her senses had tricked her after all and the light

had been but an illusion. She knew in her heart that it was not so, but she had no proof to offer. In any case it seemed that Rosemary slept, and the light—if indeed it had been there—must have been extinguished by the draught. Again she became aware of intense cold—such cold as preyed upon her very vitality itself—the cold that had gripped her that day in the yard when Silas had come to the rescue. The thought of him swept over her with a rush of feeling for which she could not account, and suddenly her eyes were full of tears.

"I must go," she said to herself again, and turning began to grope her way back.

There was nothing to keep her there. Rosemary evidently slept, and it would not be kind to disturb her. She would speak to her in the morning about the locking of her door, but till then she must be content. She went back to the fire and huddled over it, shivering intermittently, until at length utter weariness overcame the cold, and she crept to her couch and slept.

CHAPTER X

THE BARRIER

A LEADEN weariness hung upon Bobby in the morning, a weariness so great that for the first time in many years she would have overslept; but Matilda, calling to her to make up the fire again, roused her. She got up and dressed and went downstairs. She took up a cup of tea to Matilda, since she was awake, before starting upon the usual round of duties; and then, hearing a step in the yard, she went down to unlock the door.

She expected to find Cox upon the threshold, though it was somewhat early still. But it was not Cox who greeted her out of the raw dark of the winter morning.

"Good morning, Miss Roberta!" said Silas. "I want the keys, please, and the hot stuff for the hens. Is it ready?"

She gave ground before him, her hand oddly pressed to her heart. He came in, took the keys from the nail himself, and then passed on to the kitchen-fire in search of the food.

Bobby followed and joined him there. "You really shouldn't," she began.

He interrupted her sternly. "Miss Roberta, I am the best judge of that. Anyhow, we won't stop to discuss it now. You've got something better to do, and so have I."

He lifted the hot meal off the fire with the words, took up the wooden spoon from the table, and turned to go.

"Won't you have some tea?" she suggested as he reached the door.

He threw her an abrupt smile over his shoulder. "No, thanks. Mary's seen to that. Have another cup yourself! I'll be back presently with the eggs."

He was gone. The door clanged behind him, and Bobby was left standing before the fire.

"What ever shall I do?" she said. "There's no stopping him."

Which was true. Silas's steam-roller tactics completely outmatched her subtler methods. To stand in his way was to be flattened out. It seemed safer to step on one side and leave his progress unopposed.

She took his advice and drank some more tea, which considerably revived her. When he came in some time later with the eggs, she had mastered her weariness and was deep in the morning's work.

He set down the basket and looked at her. "Is that how you're going on all day?" he said.

She was cleaning the grate in the parlour. She glanced up at the bulky figure filling the doorway without rising from her knees.

"I never mind anything when once the fires are lighted," she said. "They just make all the difference."

"Then I'll come round and light your fires for you too," said Silas.

She laughed, though he remained serious. "Indeed you won't do anything more for me! You are already doing much too much. I ought not to let you do it, only—"

"You can't help it," said Silas, turning on his heel.

It was quite true, but she felt she should not have let it pass unchallenged. He was gone, however, while she was still searching for a suitable reply.

She returned to her work with more vigour. Somehow the encounter had done her good, even though she had had the worst of it. She determined that as soon as Matilda was about again, she would re-assert her independence.

She went up to call Rosemary at her usual hour, and found her already up and dressing. The girl's greeting of her was just as loving as usual, but it seemed to Bobby that the reserve of the past few days was made almost more palpable in consequence. Or was it her own state of mind that made her suspicious? She tried to think so as she gazed at the fresh young face which had so tortured her in her dream.

Not until they were seated at breakfast together did she broach the subject of her night adventure, and then it was with a curious sense of reluctance that was almost dread.

"Rosemary darling," she said, "I saw your light burning in the middle of the night. Did you leave it alight by mistake?"

Rosemary's eyes came straight to hers with unfaltering directness. "No, I didn't, Aunt Bobby," she said. "I lighted it on purpose."

"Why, darling?" Bobby was aware of a faint note of distress in her voice, though she tried to keep it normal.

"I didn't feel sleepy," said Rosemary. "It's not much fun lying in the dark when one is wide awake."

"You shouldn't have been wide awake, dear," said

Bobby. "What was the matter? You weren't startled, were you?"

Rosemary's eyes remained unflinchingly direct, but they seemed to grow a little darker. "No, I wasn't frightened at anything," she said. "Why?"

With a conscious effort Bobby made reply. "Because when I tried to come in to you, I found your door locked."

"Oh!" said Rosemary in a tone of enlightenment. "I thought I heard something just as I was settling down, but the wind was making such a noise one couldn't be sure."

"But, darling, the door!" said Bobby almost in a voice of pleading. "Why was it locked?"

A gleam of revolt shone suddenly in Rosemary's eyes. "Because I locked it, I suppose," she said with brevity.

Bobby gathered her forces. "I would rather you didn't lock it, dear," she said quietly. "It is unnecessary and it might be dangerous. Please don't lock it again!"

Rosemary's eyes took fire. She sat for a moment quite motionless, then with a hard breath she spoke. "Am I to be denied even privacy, Aunt Bobby? Do you call that quite fair?"

It was not the words but the tone that told Bobby that a struggle was before her. She sought to avert it, albeit with a sinking heart. "You will do as I say, please, Rosemary, or——"

"Or what?" demanded Rosemary.

"Or I shall have to take away the key," said Bobby.

Rosemary stiffened as she sat. Her face went slowly white, but her eyes remained fiercely alight, flaming.

It was a swift sense of expediency that moved Bobby

to continue ere she could give utterance to the seething rebellion within her. "You see, darling, it really is a very unreasonable thing to do. Who do you want to lock out? Surely not me! And I am the only person who ever enters your room besides yourself."

Again there was pleading in her voice, but she felt even as she spoke that she spoke in vain. The gathering storm of revolt could scarcely be quelled by any but stern measures at this stage. She summoned all her strength for a battle. And then to her amazement she found it was not needed.

Rosemary spoke, almost under her breath. "You know best, Aunt Bobby," she said, and with the words she dropped her lids over those burning eyes and resumed her breakfast.

It was the strangest submission that she had ever accorded to Bobby's authority, and for the moment the latter was almost breathless with surprise. She watched her covertly as she resumed her own meal, but she detected no faintest sign of emotion in Rosemary's bearing and behaviour. She acted precisely as though there had been no discussion of any sort between them, and to Bobby who so well knew her tempestuous moods there appeared to be something ominous in her calm acceptance of defeat. Though she realized that the struggle was definitely over, she could not feel any genuine relief. Somehow it seemed to her that a battle, however arduous, would have been more satisfactory in the end.

When the meal was over, she put her arm round Rosemary and kissed her. Instantly she was aware of a curious sense of withdrawal wholly indefinite in the girl. Rosemary accepted her embrace, even returned it, but

there was no spontaneity in her action. Bobby felt chilled to the heart, though there was nothing whatever in her conduct to which to take exception.

Perhaps she was getting over-critical, she told herself as she went about her work. Perhaps she expected too much. But the fact remained, and could not be ignored, that Rosemary had somehow made her feel that a barrier even stronger than the oak door upstairs had been raised against her, and no effort of hers would avail to break it down.

The day was grey and very cold. There was a hint of snow in the air, and no glint of sunshine penetrated the clouds. The coming of Dr. Bellamy was the only bright spot in the general monotony. Bobby welcomed him because he cheered Matilda, who was never irritable or difficult in his presence. He was essentially a cheery individual of perennial youth and vigour in spite of the fact that he had been twice widowed. Bobby never had much time for him, but Matilda was wont to declare that he was the only person worth knowing in the wilderness in which they lived.

He spent some time cracking jokes with her upstairs while Bobby was preparing the lunch, and when he descended he told her that her sister would soon be able to come down again.

"You'll have to take care of her," he said. "Don't let her do too much! You energetic people who keep going all day don't always realize that it isn't everyone who can."

Bobby smiled upon him—such a smile as she would have bestowed upon an over-intelligent child. "Oh, I'm not quite so energetic as that," she said.

Dr. Bellamy peered shortsightedly about him. "And where is Rosemary?" he said.

"I think she is in the stable," said Bobby. "She is busy outside, anyway."

He rubbed his hands together. "Splendid, Miss Roberta! You have a wonderful gift for making people work. And how goes the farm? Flourishing as usual?"

"Much as usual," smiled Bobby.

He went to the window that looked across the yard. "Hullo! Hullo! A visitor! Young Hudson, isn't it? Aha! Miss Rosemary has found a helper!"

Bobby glanced out. The stable-door was open, and just within it she saw a grey figure which she also recognized as that of Percy Hudson, though his back was towards her. Rosemary was out of sight, but a shout of merry laughter testified to her presence inside, and Bobby turned away with a sharp pang. She had not heard her laugh like that for weeks.

Dr. Bellamy continued his facetious remarks. "You'll have to look after that young lady. She's getting to the saucy stage. And she's got looks enough to trail all the unmarried men in the county at her heels. Which reminds me. The new Lord Ravencombe is expected down, I hear, and he is one of them. He has only just arrived in England. No, he won't be staying at the Abbey. The place is still shut up, and it'll want some re-building before it's habitable. But rumour has it that he is going to take it in hand. It'll brighten things up considerably locally if he does."

"It's five miles away," observed Bobby. "I hardly think it would make much difference to Stapleton."

"Don't you be too sure!" laughed Dr. Bellamy. "The

property includes the greater part of Bode. You had better secure his custom for eggs, my dear lady. Yours are the only hens I know that do their duty in the winter."

She laughed with him. It was his chief recommendation in her eyes that he never expected anything else. She sometimes thought that he prided himself on being able to raise a laugh wherever he went, though he did not always know how he did it. One thing was certain. In a social sense he never required more than half her attention.

"Well, well," he said, "I must be going. You keep an eye on that young fledgling of yours or you'll have her spreading her wings before you know where you are!"

Bobby bade him a smiling farewell, and wondered as she did so if he had ever made an original remark in his life.

After letting him out at the front door, she turned to the back to summon Rosemary to lunch, and met her just coming in.

"Was that Percy Hudson I saw just now?" she asked.
"Won't he come in?"

Rosemary entered. Her face was all aglow with the exertion of sweeping the stable, and even Bobby was for an instant startled by the sheer beauty of her. She had an arresting look. Yet her voice sounded wholly indifferent as she made reply.

"Yes, it was Percy. He's gone again. He was passing this way and looked in."

Careless words spoken with the utmost carelessness while she surveyed herself in one of Bobby's shining dish-covers! Why did Bobby's anxious heart sink a little lower as she heard them?

"What a guy I look!" was Rosemary's conclusion. "I'd better go and get decent. I'll be down by the time you've taken up Aunt Matilda's tray."

She departed, and Bobby stifled a sigh. Was it merely youth, or was it artifice, that had raised that barrier against her?

CHAPTER XI

THE EMPTY ROOM

SOMETHING told Bobby that as it was Boxing Day and Cox was working short hours, she would not be left unassisted that afternoon. But for some reason Rosemary was determined to do the feeding for her, and when she heard the familiar step in the yard, she went out quickly to intercept the second helper.

"Rosemary is doing it all," she told him rather nervously. "Thank you so much for coming up. But please don't come again!"

He looked down at her oddly, half-whimsically. "I've come on business only," he said.

She understood the reference and coloured. "I know. You are more than kind. But you see—I really don't need your help this time."

"And when you do need it," said Silas, "I suppose you won't dream of letting me know."

She raised her eyes steadily to his. "I think I would," she said, "if I needed it very badly."

"But would you?" said Silas.

For one moment she hesitated. Then she held out her hand to him. "I would," she said simply.

It was the action of a friend, no more, and his answering grasp was exactly what she desired it to be. He was learning by rigorous self-discipline to meet her need.

"Thank you for that," he said.

She laughed rather tremulously. "How nicely you put things! Won't you come in for a minute? I am all alone."

"Are you ever anything else?" he said. "No, I won't come in, thanks. I've plenty to do. Everything going all right?"

"Oh yes," said Bobby.

She knew his eyes were upon her, and she met their scrutiny with a conscious effort, feeling that in spite of her they saw too much.

He made no comment, however, upon what he saw. "I shall be round in the morning," he remarked briefly, and went his way without looking back.

The dusk swallowed him and she went back to her kitchen with a half-sigh. For a reason wholly unaccountable she felt as if she were fighting against heavier odds than usual that day. She asked herself for the first time what life would be without that strong friend of hers waiting within reach to help her. It was being gradually but very strongly borne in upon her that the burden she carried was beyond her strength.

Nevertheless, when Rosemary returned for tea she managed to present her usual serene front. She dared not seem to flag in her presence. There was too much at stake.

But Rosemary was too abstracted to notice anything beyond the ordinary in her aunt's demeanour. She had her tea with scarcely a word, and immediately took up her Schiller thereafter while Bobby washed up and then went to sit with Matilda.

The night fell with an icy rain which soon turned to snow—the first of the season.

"It'll be deep in the morning," said Bobby.

"I certainly shall not come down if it is," said Matilda.

"I expect a good night will make all the difference," said Bobby.

"Well, I earnestly hope you will allow me to have a good night this time," remarked Matilda. "I can assure you that being awakened by anyone in a wild nightmare is anything but helpful to a poor invalid. What on earth did you think was the matter last night, I wonder?"

"I really can't tell you," said Bobby. "But I will sleep in my own room to-night if you like, and then you will be undisturbed."

"With a deep snow and the fire going out!" said Matilda. "You really are the most inconsiderate person I have ever met. You would probably find me dead in the morning, and I don't suppose you would mind if you did."

"Don't be ridiculous, dear!" said Bobby.

"Well, I often think I am nothing but a burden to you," said Matilda pathetically. "You would be much happier with only Rosemary to look after, and it's absurd to pretend otherwise. You have never thought of anyone but that child ever since she made her unfortunate appearance in this world."

"Well, I don't think we need quarrel about that," said Bobby, bending lower over her work.

"Quarrel! I never want to quarrel," declared Matilda. "I am sure no one can say I am hard to live with. It is you who make all the difficulties. Dr. Bellamy was saying only to-day what a splendid patient I am. He knows what poor health I have, far better than you do. But

even he never guesses what trials I have to bear as well. You get more and more heartless every day."

She ended on a doleful note that was not without a suggestion of tears, but Bobby did not look up.

She only murmured the word, "Heartless!" over her work.

Matilda pursued her theme with rising emotion. "Ever since you took to this horrible farm-work, I've seen you changing. You used to be so warm-hearted and quick of perception. Why, I remember—even now—how on the day I was to have been married, you put your arms round me and comforted me and promised—yes, promised—you would never leave me." She paused to wipe away her tears. "And now you lightly talk of letting me sleep alone and make up my own fire when I am ill and needing attention. You would never have done that in those days."

"Ah!" Bobby almost whispered the words with her head still bent. "Perhaps—we have both changed—since then."

"I haven't," declared Matilda. "I am just the same loving, credulous creature that I was as a girl. How I used to believe in everybody—especially you—and your devotion——"

She began to choke over the words; her tears were flowing freely. Bobby looked up at last, and then with quiet suddenness rose and came to the side of the bed.

"Matilda," she said, "stop crying! It won't do you any good, and you've nothing to cry about. Matilda, are you listening? Stop!"

There was no harshness in her voice, but it held indisputable authority. Matilda changed her tactics and

began to cough. Much can be expressed by a coughing-fit. When she was quiet again, the tears had ceased.

"You are very unkind," she said to the rigid figure standing by her bedside.

"I don't think I am," said Bobby, and, stooping, rearranged her pillows and kissed her. "But we must be sensible, you and I. We can't afford to be anything else."

"Oh, don't use that horrid verb!" protested Matilda. "Have we ever afforded to do anything except lead a life of complete drudgery? I often wonder what on earth Dr. Bellamy would say if he knew all."

"Does Dr. Bellamy matter?" said Bobby, faint irony in her voice.

Matilda evaded the question. "Not to you, I am sure. You consult nobody but Silas Hickory, and much good it does. Now I suppose you are going down, and I shan't see any more of you till bedtime."

"I must go and see to the supper, dear," said Bobby gently.

"It's always something," fretted Matilda.

Bobby said nothing. She merely turned and laid her work together, then softly left the room.

Downstairs Rosemary was poring over her book and did not raise her eyes. Bobby passed through to the kitchen and began her preparations for the evening meal. Her heart was very heavy. An atmosphere of discontent seemed to meet her whichever way she turned, and she did not know how to cope with it. She knew herself to be unequal to the contest and an overwhelming presentiment of failure weighed her down.

She was in the middle of her task when Rosemary came to her, book in hand.

"Aunt Bobby, I've got to the end of the first act. I should like you to hear me say it to-night," she said.

Bobby turned towards her. She wanted to throw her arms around her and tell her of her own aching need for help, but something about Rosemary restrained her. She stood so straight and coldly unresponsive.

"Oh, never mind about it, darling, to-night!" she said. "Couldn't we sit cosily by the fire for a little while presently and have one of our talks?"

"There won't be time," said Rosemary. "Aunt Matilda will be wanting you. Besides, I should like you to hear it to-night if you don't mind."

Bobby had no arguments. She felt chilled and helpless. "Very well, dear, if you really wish it," she said.

And so, when Matilda had been served, they sat together at the supper-table and had their meal, while all that passed between them was Rosemary reciting German in a low voice and her own occasional, equally low corrections. She looked back upon that evening later with a wrung heart.

It was a relief to them both when it was over. Rosemary had a quick memory, and she acquitted herself well. As Bobby closed the book, she suffered herself to utter a word of praise.

"That is very good, dear. You have worked harder than I expected."

"I am glad you are satisfied," said Rosemary.

"I am more than satisfied, dear child," Bobby said fondly. "Don't slave at it too much! I will let you go out with Mr. Roper the next time he asks you."

A curious look flashed across Rosemary's face. It was

almost a look of pain, Bobby thought, but it was gone ere she had time to be sure.

"Thank you very much," said Rosemary sedately.

She took back the book and began to glance through it.

"You won't do any more to-night, dear," said Bobby half-wistfully.

Rosemary shook her head. "No, I don't think so. Are you going up to Aunt Matilda? Then perhaps I'd better say good night."

"I may manage to come down again," said Bobby.

"Oh, I shouldn't, dear," said Rosemary. "You're very tired. Go to bed early and sleep as long as you can!"

She put her arms round her and kissed her with the words.

Bobby strained the young body close to her heart for a few moments, and again she wondered sorrowfully if it were her fancy or if she actually sensed an impulse of withdrawal on Rosemary's part—a reluctance to surrender herself to any act of intimacy that might lead to confidences.

She released her and turned away, but as she reached the door Rosemary was by her side, and she found herself caught in one of the great bear-hugs of former days.

"Good night, Aunt Bobby darling!" whispered Rosemary into her ear. "Do sleep well to-night, and don't worry any more about me!"

As she went upstairs after that huge embrace, tears that she could not check were in her eyes. She knew that Rosemary had spoken the truth and she was very tired. Yet as she lay down in Matilda's room a little later she was not unhappy. For it seemed to her that the barrier

had been swept away in that instant, and though it might be raised again it was no longer insurmountable.

Late that night or in the very early hours of the morning, a voice called her—Rosemary's voice. She arose in the dimness of firelight and nightlight, thrust her feet into slippers, threw on her dressing-gown, and went from the room in answer to the call, leaving Matilda sleeping.

She groped her way along the dark passage to Rosemary's door and found it flung wide. She entered, softly whispering her darling's name. She found the bed and felt it over. There was no form lying there.

A sudden agony caught at her heart. Instinctively she turned to the little table by the bed and groped for a box of matches. She found it and struck a light. It flickered in the icy draught and went out. But she had seen all she needed to see—the smooth pillow and untouched bedclothes—the starkly empty room. She also saw the little paper-backed Schiller lying on the table. . . .

Half-an-hour later there came a frantic knocking at the door of Staple Farm. It aroused Silas, whose room was immediately over it, and he got up and put his head out of the open window to find it was snowing heavily.

"Hullo!" he called. "Hullo! What is it?"

A woman's voice, sharp with anguish, answered him. "Silas! Silas! It's me!"

That voice was enough for Silas. He lighted a candle, dragged on a coat, and went down to her. Barefooted on the stones, he drew back the bolts and pulled open the door.

She stumbled in upon him, herself barefooted, clad only in a dressing-gown over her night attire. The snow was shining in her hair. Her eyes wildly implored him.

"Oh, Silas!" she gasped. "Silas! I've lost my Rosemary! Find her for me—find her—and I will give you—all I have!"

She fell forward with the words. His arms upheld her. As he lifted her, he knew by the deadness of the weight he bore that she was senseless.

PART III

CHAPTER I

BOXING NIGHT

THE Boxing Night Ball at Bode was in full swing. It was regarded by a good many as one of the most important local functions of the season, scarcely indeed second to the Hunt Ball which took place a little later. The subscription was a high one which kept it select, and since it was in aid of the Bode Cottage Hospital, there were a good many county families who brought house-parties to dance at it. The fact that fancy-dress was worn was a considerable attraction, and a military band from a not-far-distant dépôt combined with an excellent dancing-floor to make it what Percy had described as a "regular swell affair."

Every year saw the Boxing Night Ball increase in magnificence. All the local magnates attended it, and in many circles it was the chief topic under discussion for weeks beforehand. It was the one night in the year in which the whole of Bode awoke to life and became transformed from a normal and somewhat sleepy market-town to a buzzing hive of excitement. Hotels and inns were full, and the Town Hall itself was elaborately illuminated and threw a blaze of light over the whole of the market-place

which was turned for the occasion into a parking-ground for cars.

The whole atmosphere was one of general festivity of the type that penetrates through closed doors, refusing to be ignored. *The King's Head* in particular seemed to have caught the Boxing Night fever, probably on account of the fact that it stood practically next-door to the Town Hall. Market-day was usually its only busy time, but that Boxing Night more than eclipsed the busiest market-day that had ever happened. The place was full from attic to cellar, and a state of merry confusion prevailed which was almost reminiscent of the departed glory of old coaching-days. The fact that snow was falling thickly and promised to be deep ere morning was mainly accountable for this, and, as old Bill Roper the landlord, brother of the veterinary-surgeon, said, it had come just in the nick of time. It did not often fall to his lot to turn would-be guests from his doors, but on this occasion if he had displayed a notice of "House Full" quite early in the evening it would have saved a considerable amount of trouble.

He said as much, chuckling, to the only guest who had engaged a room for more than that one hectic night, one Richard Graves whom Bill Roper regarded as "something of a card," mainly because he did not know what he was. Of course he might have been an artist. They were always queer fish, but it was not the time of year for artists. And this man had an unfamiliar hang about him. He really might have been anything. A dark man with iron-grey hair and reticent manner, yet not without a hint of humour when the merry-faced landlord claimed his sympathy!

"You'd better make hay while the sun shines," was his comment. "Put up your prices!"

"And I'd get it too, sir," said Bill Roper, still chuckling. "But I dunno. I says to the missis, 'It's making capital out of the weather,' I says. 'And that's a thing I don't hold with. You never know but what your turn may come next.'"

"That's an idea," said Richard Graves. "But I don't see why you should stick at taking advantage of the weather, even if your turn does come next."

"Well, I dunno, sir," said Bill Roper, puckering his honest forehead. "But it's handed straight out to us from God Almighty, and I don't think He'd like me for to put my prices up in consequence. It's a matter of opinion as you might say, sir. But that's how it appears to me."

"A very decent point of view!" said his guest. "And all the better for me, I suppose. What time does this hurly-burly begin?"

"Lor' bless you, sir, it began nearly an hour ago," said Bill Roper. "But people keeps on coming. Why, there's a young gentleman downstairs now, brought a young lady with him, and she wants somewhere to dress in. I don't know where to put 'em, but it seems un-Christian-like to turn 'em away just for that. It isn't as if they wanted to sleep. That I couldn't do. I'm sleeping in the kitchen myself to-night."

"Have you turned them away?" said Graves.

"No, sir. Haven't even seen 'em. They were talking to Jim at the door as I came upstairs. He may think of some corner where she could get into her finery. I don't like disappointing people, you know, sir. But what am

I to do? The house isn't made of elastic, as you might say. And I'd be afraid of its bursting if it was, for it's stretched as full as it can go now."

"Oh, look here!" said Graves abruptly. "If it's only to dress in, the lady can have this room. I'll come down to the parlour. You go and tell them while I clear my things out of the way!"

"Well, there now, sir," said the landlord. "That is a kind act if you like. And a nice fire burning too! I'll tell her she isn't to take more than twenty minutes, and you can get back to it."

He spoke with feeling, for his guest had rather a pinched, gaunt look as if the severe weather were not exactly such as he enjoyed.

But Graves pulled him up. "You won't do anything of the kind," he said. "She can take as long as she likes."

"Which won't be very long with all that clatter going on in the Town Hall!" chuckled the landlord. "D'yer hear it, sir? Funny noise, isn't it, what they calls dance-music nowadays?"

Graves smiled somewhat sardonically. "Doubtless it suits the mentality of those for whom it was created," he observed. "You go and find those would-be dancers while I tidy up!"

Roper departed, still chuckling. He had conceived a liking for "that Mr. Graves," and he thoroughly enjoyed his rather caustic remarks which appealed to a vein of humour within himself which was seldom reached in every-day life.

At the end of about a couple of minutes a tap came upon the door of Graves's room, and going to it he discovered a chambermaid with some hot water.

"The young lady is just coming upstairs now, sir," she announced.

He gave a final glance around. "All right. I'll go. Tell her there's no hurry!"

He walked out into the passage with the words and deliberately turned in the opposite direction to the stairs to avoid meeting the late arrival for whose benefit he was sacrificing his comfort. The sardonic look still lingered about his thin lips as he went. He had not the air of a man who would do much for his fellow-beings.

When he deemed the coast was clear, he turned about and went back. Down in the hall a fire was burning and a few dilapidated chairs stood about. He pulled one of them up to the hearth and picked up a paper. There was a cheery noise in the bar that mingled with the machine-like music of the fox-trot that was wafted from the Town Hall. There was the raw cold of falling snow in the atmosphere.

Only one other person was in the hall—a young man clad in a heavy overcoat who sat near the entrance smoking a cigarette with a kind of restless alertness and glancing now and then with impatient eyes towards the stairs.

He paid no attention to Graves who was presently joined by the landlord who came to the fire, rubbing his hands.

"It's a bitter cold night," he observed. "There'll be a deep fall by morning. Thought you were going into the parlour, sir. There's a decent fire in there."

"This is good enough for me, thanks," said Graves.

Bill Roper continued to rub his hands for a space; then he stood up and looked across at the young man near the door.

"Won't you come and get warm?" he said genially.

The new-comer remained in his seat. "I'm all right, thanks. It'll probably be too hot dancing. Anyhow, I'm warm enough."

He spoke with the faintest hint of hauteur, as though he did not desire to encourage attention. The man in the chair threw him a brief glance over his shoulder.

Bill Roper was wholly undiscouraged. "I suppose you're in fancy-dress, sir," he remarked tentatively. "It's optional of course, but I expect all the young ones are."

His curiosity was not gratified. The object thereof merely lit another cigarette without replying.

Bill Roper turned back to the fire. "I wonder you don't go in for a fling, sir," he said to Graves. "If it's only to watch, they say it's worth seeing."

"I think your fireside is more attractive," said Graves.

Bill Roper warmed his hands for a little longer and went back to the bar. Graves studied his paper in complete silence, and his companion continued to smoke with suppressed energy.

Suddenly there came a sound close at hand—the tap of a light foot on the winding oak stair. The young man by the door sprang up; the other half-grudgingly turned in his chair.

A figure came into view—an eager, swift-moving figure, clad in white from head to foot with a bridal veil of heavy lace completely covering the face and held in place by a band of seed pearls worn like a wreath.

"By Jove!" ejaculated Percy Hudson, throwing away his cigarette.

A peal of merry laughter answered him. She advanced, trailing a long satin train behind her.

"Do you like me?" she said ingenuously. "It's fearfully old of course, but rather pretty, don't you think?"

"Like you!" said Percy. "You're exquisite!"

There was an odd, unexpected tremor in his voice. He stood staring at her, as if he hardly believed his senses.

The other man had risen, and he also was staring at the dainty, veiled bride who stood laughing in the middle of the hall. Something of incredulity was on his face also, a wonder that was almost pain; but he spoke not a word, merely stood and watched the little drama that was being enacted before him, so motionless that the actors therein scarcely realized his presence.

"Lift up that veil thing!" the boy was saying. "I want to see you."

But the bride only laughed tantalizingly and held the thick folds about her.

"No, no, Percy! They never used to turn it back till after the ceremony. It was the sign for the kissing to begin. Now come along! We've wasted enough time as it is. You'll have to carry me if the snow is thick. I've got nothing but satin slippers."

"Oh, I'll carry you all right," he laughed back. "But that train is going to be a nuisance. You'll never dance in it."

"Oh yes, I shall carry it over my arm," said the bride, with cheery unconcern. "Do let's go! I'm longing to get there. Just listen to that music! Isn't it gorgeous? You are ready, aren't you, Percy?"

She spoke with some impatience, for he still seemed inclined to stand and gaze at her rather than ring up the curtain and let the fun begin.

"Yes, yes, I'm ready," he said. "But I say, I'm not living up to this. I'm not in bridegroom kit."

"Silly! You're not the bridegroom," she retorted light-heartedly.

He took fire at her challenge, carelessly as it was uttered. "Ho! Don't you be too sure of that! I'm in command of this expedition anyhow."

Her laughter rang through the hall with reckless gaiety. "My dear Percy, you're only the juvenile lead! What *are* you wearing, by the way? I hope you've got something decent under that ugly old coat of yours."

"Oh, don't bother about that! I'm decent enough," he declared. "And look here, Rosemary, none of your pranks with me to-night! You've just got to stick to me. See?"

"'Till death us do part,'" mocked Rosemary. "What a dreadful thought, Percy! Fancy you and me going on and on and on together for the rest of our lives!"

She suddenly became aware of the silent attention of the stranger standing on the hearth, and returned his scrutiny for a second or two with a dainty bravado. Then with a swing she wheeled back to her cavalier, who was meditating a suitable *riposte* for her latest thrust, and pushed her hand through his arm.

"Come along! Let's go! Do let's go! Isn't it a shame to waste time like this? And I expect there's a prince waiting if we only knew it. Let's go and find him!"

"We'll stick him under the fifth rib if we do," declared Percy not wholly in jest, pulling open the door.

An icy wind rushed in with some glittering flakes of

snow. The bride gave a cry of mingled delight and dismay.

"You'll have to carry me! I said you would! Percy, look out! Percy, I'm not ready!"

The door clanged on her protest followed a laughing struggle, sounds of which came back to the motionless watcher for a few seconds, and then ceased. There remained only the jigging music of the distant band and the savage whistling of the wind.

He moved at last, stiffly, almost like a man coming out of a trance, walked across the hall to the stairs, paused a moment, then went quietly up and back to the room he had vacated.

CHAPTER II

THE CAPTURE

WHEN Rosemary first entered the great ball-room she halted in bewilderment. Never before had she seen anything in the least like it. It was like a step into the most fantastic fairyland that she had ever pictured.

The place was a blaze of light, and the crowds that thronged the floor made a dazzling kaleidoscope of colour that seemed to go to her head. Without knowing it, she uttered a breathless laugh of sheer delirious excitement.

"I believe it's a dream," she said.

The heavy veil she wore became suddenly cumbersome, obstructing her vision. She lifted it impulsively and threw it back.

"Is that a sign for the kissing to begin?" said Percy's voice in her ear.

She flung him a look that had in it a hint of resentment though she still laughed. Now that she had really reached the goal of her desire, she had no special use for Percy. He had been a means to an end. He was now merely an interruption. She wanted to go straight forward and lose herself in that laughing, amazing throng. Like a child that clutches at a glittering bauble, she could think of nothing else.

The music too, now heard at close quarters, had in it

an intoxicating element, a subtle attraction like a will-o'-the-wisp that beckoned and fled before her. But, curiously enough, in those first wonderful seconds, she did not think of dancing. Just to absorb the light and wonder of it all was what she needed.

Then again there came Percy's voice, quick and urgent, close to her. "Come on! Who's wasting time now? Hitch up that train of yours and let's get going!"

She thought to herself, as somewhat mechanically she complied, that Percy Hudson was the least romantic part of the whole thing. He was dressed in an old-fashioned labourer's smock, but he quite failed to look anything but an up-to-date youth in a very inadequate disguise. There were other figures moving around her which held a far greater appeal, figures in mediæval costume and resplendent old-world uniforms, ladies in exquisite brocades and laces who ought to have been dropping curtseys and dancing the minuet. As she slid out on to the shining floor with Percy she felt almost like an intruder though something whispered to her that her own bridal dress of twenty years ago was as charming as any there.

It had the merit of originality also, and it was not long before she began to realize that she was attracting attention. She was still too unspoilt to imagine that her beauty was in any way extraordinary. She ascribed it all to the fact that there was no other bride in the room. But Percy knew better, and though he appreciated the fact that his partner was the *belle* of the ball, he was inclined to regard with some disfavour the admiration that she excited.

Another factor with which he had not reckoned was that he was bound to meet acquaintances at such a function. He would have preferred to devote himself ex-

clusively to Rosemary, but this was not to be. When the dance was over, he was accosted by several people whom he knew, and he was obliged to introduce Rosemary albeit with extreme reluctance. He tried to maintain a proprietary air, but Rosemary did not second his efforts. She wanted the utmost that life could give that night, and both hands were stretched out to receive it.

She accepted an invitation to dance with a man with whom Percy was not very intimate, and deserted him light-heartedly for several dances thereafter.

When eventually she returned to him, he led her to a quiet corner and took her to task.

"It's rotten bad form," he said. "I brought you, after all."

"Oh, give me a cigarette," said Rosemary, "and don't be silly!"

Then as he still looked unappeased she wound a coaxing arm in his and laughed into his discontented face.

"Dear old Percy, don't spoil things!" she urged. "I know you brought me, and I'm everlastingly grateful. But do let me enjoy things now I'm here!"

There was no resisting her appeal. His face cleared in spite of him. He bent towards her. "Of course you shall!" he said. "But let me enjoy it too! I hate standing and watching you dance."

"Well, go and dance with someone else!" cried Rosemary gaily. "There are heaps to be had."

"I don't want anyone but you," he said.

The ardour of his voice and eyes held her. She also was moved, scarcely knowing why.

"Of course I love dancing with you," she said. "Only don't you see I want to do everything."

She had not as a matter of fact greatly enjoyed her change of partners though she deemed it wiser not to flatter him by telling him so. She had a curious feeling as of being on the edge of a volcano while in his company that night—such a feeling as she had never before experienced—and it was in part to avoid this that she had deserted him. But her late partner had not been a very inspiring dancer, and she was not sorry on the whole to return.

"I wonder if The Old Bean has found out yet," she said, by way of turning the conversation.

Percy was holding the hand she had slipped through his arm. His grasp became a little closer as he made reply.

"Not he! He always sleeps like an ox. Besides, he couldn't find out. He thinks I went in the other direction to the Ransoms'."

"Did you tell him so?" asked Rosemary.

Percy chuckled. "Not exactly! I told him I'd been asked to go round, and asked if he minded my using the car to go. I also let him infer that to-night's show was off as I was sure your aunt wouldn't let you go."

"That was quite ingenious," laughed Rosemary. "But he wouldn't expect you to make a night of it at the Ransoms', would he? What if he waited up?"

"Oh, rats!" said Percy. "There's nothing would keep that Scotchman from his sleep. You bet he tucked himself up long ago."

"I wonder," said Rosemary. "Anyway, he couldn't follow us here, could he? Unless he took your old motor-bike which is always breaking down."

"Oh, he won't follow us," declared Percy. "Not that

it would matter much if he did. He couldn't do anything."

Rosemary gave a little shiver. "Oh, I shouldn't like him to turn up here," she said. "He would spoil everything."

"He won't turn up," Percy assured her. "Don't you worry! Even if he did, he hasn't any authority. He couldn't forbid the banns."

"Don't be absurd!" said Rosemary.

He looked at her. "I'm not absurd. And if I were, it would be your own fault. What made you think of coming as a bride? And where did you get that priceless turn-out?"

Rosemary surveyed her finery with a complacent air. "It isn't too bad, is it? I can't help thinking it was made for Aunt Matilda when she was young. She got very near being married once, and then something happened and she was let down. I found it one day in an old trunk in the attic quite by accident, and tried it on just for fun. It fitted beautifully, and everything was there, shoes and stockings and veil. I nearly came down in it, and then I thought I might get into a row, so I just put it away again and didn't tell anyone. I'm glad you like it. It seemed a pity that it should never see the light of day."

"I love it," said Percy. "And I'll tell you what I'd love better still, and that is to see you married in it."

"Oh, don't be absurd!" said Rosemary again, but she said it a little uneasily for there was something about Percy—the close clasp of his hand, the fiery intentness of his eyes—which, though it thrilled her, made her feel vaguely uncertain of him. It was like riding a restive

horse which must on no account be allowed to obtain the mastery.

"Do you think me absurd?" he said, leaning nearer to her.

Rosemary leaned away, laughing. "Of course I do—utterly! We both are. It's what we came out for, isn't it?"

He thrust his free arm round her. "Rosemary!" he said.

She was on her feet in a moment, still laughing, the glow of excitement on her face. "Come on!" she cried. "Let's dance it off! Let's enjoy every minute! We may never get another chance!"

She was exquisite standing there. Her loveliness had a radiance which seemed to set his blood on fire. He gazed at her as though he had never seen her before, then as she turned he followed, closely, touching her, as though drawn by a magnetic attraction which was beyond all resistance.

When they were dancing together again he held her supple young body pressed close to his own in a kind of ecstasy of possession, and Rosemary, surrendering herself wholly to the enchantment of the hour, forgot her brief uneasiness and suffered all her senses to merge into the magic of a great delight.

It was her first taste, and perhaps it was not surprising that it completely intoxicated her. The whole atmosphere was like a sparkling draught to her which never left her lips. She drank and drank more deeply still, finding the cup as inexhaustible as her desire. She even began to forget that that amazing evening could ever come to an end. The rapture of it thrilled her through and through.

When her previous partner—a young solicitor of Bode called Raymond—came to her for another dance, she refused him with smiling nonchalance. Percy was an excellent dancing-partner after all, and she needed nothing else just then.

The evening was beginning to wear away when the climax of the entertainment arrived. The lights were suddenly turned low, and paper streamers, coloured balls, and feathers were tossed from the gallery among the dancers. The music quickened to a wild medley of sound, and a wave of feverish excitement seemed to sweep through the hall. The lights went out one by one until the sole illumination left was that which filtered down from two great festoons of Chinese lanterns that hung high above the throng.

They continued to dance in the dimness to that mad rush of sound which was somehow like a torrent, and it was to Rosemary as though she hovered on the edge of a whirling vortex into which sooner or later she was bound to be drawn. The crowd was dense, and there was considerable confusion and noise. Everyone was laughing and throwing some sort of missile. She found herself as it were waist-deep in paper which wound around her whichever way she turned. She heard Percy laughing with the rest, and in the reckless fever of the moment she knew that she was laughing also, albeit with that curious sense of something irresistible drawing her.

And then—how it happened she never knew, but she fancied that Percy must have stopped to fling back one of those coloured balls which were flying in all directions—suddenly she was swept from him. An arm that was like a steel spring encircled her. Her feet slid help-

lessly over the glassy floor. She had a sensation as of falling and yet being held up by a subtle strength that compelled as it were without force, while as she was borne through the confusion a voice whispered into her ear:

"Ah, Cinderella! Caught at last!"

CHAPTER III

THE PRINCE

OFTEN later Rosemary wondered why she made no attempt to free herself and return to Percy, but at the time such an action would have seemed out of place and completely unnatural. She had as it were shot the rapids, and now she floated without effort in calm water under the guidance of one who undoubtedly knew how to steer. She felt no fear. The spell that bound her had eliminated that. Even surprise had died. And, oddly enough, she had not the faintest desire to go back to her recognized partner.

This man was an infinitely better dancer. There was poetry, romance, in his every movement. He held her lightly, but—she knew it within herself—quite irresistibly, not by physical strength but by a strange magnetism of personality which she had never before experienced, a fascination so potent that even the will to resist was absent.

She could barely see him in the dim light, but he seemed to find no difficulty in avoiding the crowd. She was no longer aware of the flying missiles or the winding streamers which had seemed to fetter her. The music had died down, though the throb of fever still seemed to linger in its rhythm. It was as though she danced in a dream.

She did not speak. She seemed to have left the world of speech. This man—or being—who danced so divinely might have been the inhabitant of another sphere. In all that he did he was wholly different from anyone that she had ever before encountered. There was something foreign about him, something quick and vitalizing which warmed her blood, awaking an answer scarcely conscious yet overwhelmingly spontaneous within herself. She felt as if until that moment she had never lived, and now all that there was of her was awake and pulsing. Dream or no dream, she was more vividly aware of the life within her than she had ever been before.

On and on they danced, and sometimes the music seemed to fade and sometimes to burst into strains so fiery that her very soul was singing. She no longer saw the thronging figures about them. They had faded into the background; they might never have been. All she knew was this marvellous, almost miraculous personality which with a king-like completeness absorbed her whole consciousness.

And then—again she never knew how it happened—suddenly she was on a staircase and being drawn upwards, still by that strength which compelled without forcing. The dimly-lit dance-hall faded away, and other lights dawned upon her. She went unquestioningly, even with eagerness, half-expecting a new world to open out before her, still throbbing with the wonder and delight of this great experience.

She scarcely felt the ground beneath her feet as she passed rapidly with her unknown partner down corridor after corridor, all deserted, until they came to a door which he opened and which closed with a catch when they

had passed through, shutting out all sounds of the music and dancing far behind them.

She found herself in what appeared to be the end of a long and somewhat narrow passage, very poorly lighted by a distant lamp. There were dark oak doors at intervals, and the walls were panelled to the ceiling. They were not unlike the walls at Little Staple, and for a second or two an odd sense of dread assayed her. She thought that the spell was broken and she was just awaking to find herself back in the humdrum drabness of her daily life. Then she caught sight of herself in a long narrow mirror which had been fastened to the door through which they had just passed, and the vision reassured her. Those bridal robes had no place in Little Staple. She smiled to herself as she realized that she had half-expected that glance to reveal a boyish figure in riding-breeches.

She turned to the man beside her and looked up at him, a faint frown of perplexity on her child-like face. "Where have I seen you before?" she said.

His face with its dark thin features smiled back at her, and she found his smile entrancing. He was attired in a black Court dress, and his princely carriage impressed her deeply. "It must have been in another star," he said, "where kindred spirits meet."

But she continued to gaze at him, unconvinced. "I am certain I have seen you somewhere," she said; and then, after a moment's rapid thought, "Yes, of course! I saw you downstairs at *The King's Head*. You were standing on the hearth when I went through."

"Quite true," he admitted. "I heard you laugh and I had to follow you."

"But that wasn't the first time," persisted Rosemary, still looking puzzled. "I've seen you before somewhere."

"We met, 'twas in a crowd,'" he chanted softly. "Do you know I had the same feeling myself when I first saw you? It must have been in that other star."

He was bending towards her with the gallantry of one accustomed to move in high places. An odd tremor went through Rosemary.

"Are you a prince, I wonder?" she said.

He took her hand. "Not quite so near to a prince as you to a bride," he said. "Do you know that you are the loveliest bride I have ever seen—and that is saying much!"

"Oh, am I?" she whispered, deeply colouring. "Was that why you danced with me?"

He laughed—a low, baffling laugh. "Was it against your will?" he said.

"Oh no!" said Rosemary. "I loved it. It—was the most wonderful thing that ever happened."

"Ah, Cinderella!" he said. "What will you do when the clock strikes twelve?"

She started somewhat guiltily. "It must be long past twelve," she said. "I suppose—I ought to go back."

"Oh, why do that?" he said. "It is much more interesting to go on."

Her hand lay in his. She looked up at him with a child's gay confidence. "I don't want to go at all," she said. "I wish you had come sooner."

"What! Am I too late?" he jested. "Suppose the gates are shut behind you, and there is no return!"

"Oh!" gasped Rosemary. "What made you say that?"

She saw herself standing in the shabby room at the Vicarage, with the Vicar just finishing his tea and Mrs.

Hudson sitting stiffly by, clicking her knitting-needles. She heard the Vicar's kindly, commonplace voice uttering the very warning which had fallen so differently from this stranger's lips.

"There is always a way back," she said, as one asserting an incontrovertible truth.

"For those who lack the courage to go on?" he questioned.

Her eyes darkened. "I don't know what you mean," she said rather quickly. "Of course, one would always rather go on. It's so much more interesting."

"Much," he agreed. "But to-night's fire will be tomorrow's ashes. And you can't be always a bride."

"I've never been one yet," she said, and again she glanced half-wistfully at the wedding draperies that clothed her. "You wouldn't know me if you were to see me as I am every day."

"I should know you anywhere," he declared, "just as I knew you in that other star. You are too lovely to forget."

She glowed at his words, though if Percy had uttered them she would have scoffed. Quite suddenly, almost without her own volition, she found herself answering him in his own vein. "I know now why I came—why I had to come—why I don't want to go back."

"Ah!" he said softly. "So I don't need to tell you that!" He lifted the hand he held and put it to his lips. "I was looking for a bride," he said. "But I hardly expected to find her quite so soon."

He was drawing her to him, and she did not resist. All the normal boundaries of her life were withdrawn that night. She was utterly without experience in the ways of men, and the glamour of the unknown dazzled her. It

seemed that everything that had hitherto been denied her was held out to her in that hour, and like a child before whom a glittering mass of gems is spread she sought to grasp and hold it all.

With his arms about her she sensed again that power which was more magnetic than actual, and she gave herself up to it because she could do no other. He held her conquered, dominated, at a touch.

It was only when his lips found hers that sharp misgiving smote her and she shrank, seeking to avoid them. She might as well have tried to avoid her own soul, for his kiss was so close, so intimate, so deeply compelling, that it was as if a flame went through her whole being, setting every nerve aglow. For the first time she was aware of a mastery that permitted no evasion and would not even recognize her half-shamed withdrawal. Burning from head to foot she stood as it were locked to him, unable to resist, unable to move, until that kiss was over. Then, gasping, she hid her face, feeling that something had gone from her which would never be hers again.

He kept his arm around her, holding her pressed against his shoulder. "What is it?" he whispered after a moment. "Frightened—or only shy?"

She could not answer him, could not tell him that she was overwhelmingly ashamed, any more than she could have explained why that sense of shame so possessed her. But when he tried to lift her face again to his own, she resisted him definitely for the first time.

"I think—if you don't mind—I'll go back now," she said.

"What is it?" he said again. "Have I hurt you—offended you?"

"Oh no!" she said. "No! Please don't think that! Only—only——"

"Only," he mocked softly, "you want to keep the gates open behind you just in case of accidents. I know—I know! Well, you needn't be afraid. They are still open, and only your hand can close them."

She had begun to draw herself away, but at that she paused. Somehow he had made her feel childish and absurd.

"I am not afraid," she said. "But I think we have gone far enough for to-night."

"For to-night!" Again he repeated her words. "Is that what you always say after the first kiss?"

The hot colour flooded her face anew, proclaiming more forcibly than any words that no man had ever kissed her before.

He laughed softly at the sight. "I thought so," he said. "But every bride expects to be kissed, you know. You ought to have thought of that before."

Again she knew that he was drawing her, and she was as clay in his hands to do with as he would. For the second time she yielded, knowing within herself that as she did so he took more than he had previously taken, practically stamping out her powers of resistance. It even seemed for a few seconds as though she lost consciousness in that fiery clasp, only opening her eyes again when she felt it relax.

"Ah, that's better!" he whispered. "Poor little shy rose that has never been kissed before! What a lot you have to learn!"

She was panting a little though she sought to hide it, to look and speak naturally. "It is only for to-night," she

said, as if in self-defence. "I don't suppose—we shall ever meet again—afterwards."

"Oh, don't you?" he said. "Don't you? What about that other star? Why should we never meet again? Tell me that!"

"I—don't know," she faltered, still half-startled and half-attracted by his ardour.

"Shall I tell you why we should?" he said.

She nodded, but her eyes were downcast.

"Look at me!" he said.

She hesitated, then slowly complied. His eyes looked deeply into hers—dark eyes that drew and held. She noted for the first time a long scar down the side of his face, stretching from temple to chin, which must once have been a terrible wound. Again she had that haunting feeling that she had seen those features before, but the scar baffled her. That was unfamiliar.

He bent towards her without speaking, and she suddenly realized that he was waiting for something—waiting for something. And as she faced him, it passed from his mind to hers—a clear message which there was no mistaking. Till that moment she had not kissed him. He was waiting for her kiss.

Why she withheld it she could not have said, since she had already given him so much. But some influence was at work within her, strongly urging her. She drew back from him, quivering.

"You won't?" he said.

She turned her face aside. "I can't—yet," she faltered.

"Yet!" he echoed. "Well, well! Doesn't that mean that we shall meet again?"

He laughed at her with the words, and she felt an odd

sense of relief. She had almost expected him to be angry.

"Yes—yes! Another time!" she said. "When we know each other better."

"Must we wait for another time?" he said.

She was catching at a straw. "Oh, I think so," she said. "We—don't even know each other's names yet."

"That is soon remedied," he said.

But she clung to her straw. "No—no! Don't let us know! It would spoil everything. I am Cinderella and you are the prince—for to-night."

"And you are going to run away from me," he said, "and leave me only one little shoe to find you by?"

Was there a strange wistfulness in his voice? She did not know. But there was certainly something in it that appealed to her very strongly, and that night of emancipation had carried her beyond all known rules. She stood wavering.

"Are you?" he said.

She looked into the half-arrogant, half-pleading face so near her own, and her brief resistance died. Yet she glanced around her uneasily, for the inner voice would not be stilled.

"Someone might find us here," she whispered. "Percy is sure to be looking somewhere."

He straightened himself. "He won't look here," he said. "You don't know where you are? Come! I will show you."

With his arm about her he led her down the passage between the rows of doors, turned a corner at the end and paused on the threshold of a room.

"Oh!" said Rosemary in astonishment. There was a

glow of firelight within. She stood, looking up at him. "This is the room someone lent me to change in," she said.

He made a courteous gesture. "Yes, mine," he said. "And yours for as long as you care to make it so."

But she still stood on the threshold. "How did we get here?" she said.

He indicated the way he had led her. "There is a connecting door with the Town Hall, not generally used."

"Oh!" said Rosemary again. "Then—you meant to bring me here!"

He smiled enigmatically. "I knew you would have to come sooner or later."

He was waiting for her to enter. She went slowly forward. The firelight invited her. She had dressed in such haste a few hours before that she had hardly noticed it. Now with a feeling of physical weariness she welcomed the cheery glow.

She stood before it, her bridal draperies falling all around her, and felt the comforting warmth creeping all about her.

From behind her came the soft shutting of the door and the shooting of a bolt. "That will make everything safe," he said.

She heard him come up to her, but she did not turn. Did she realize in those few seconds that the gates were closing and that there would be no return? Impossible to say, but it was no unwilling prisoner who waited in the red glow of the fire. Her heart was beating fast and hard. As he reached her, she turned, throbbing, to give him what he had asked.

But the next moment with a gasp she drew back. The

fitful firelight playing on his face had shown her something—something which made her catch her breath and gasp. Its hard lines were eliminated. She saw only the straight, patrician features with their look of high daring and command. The burden of years was lifted from him, and in that moment she saw him as a being from another world—a being whom she had long known and worshipped from afar.

"Oh!" she said. "It is you!"

He was looking at her oddly, as though the firelight had revealed something to him also.

"Why didn't I recognize you before?" he said in a puzzled tone. "You are just as you used to be—not a day older!"

She caught back a laugh that had a hysterical sound even to herself. "You couldn't recognize me. You have never seen me before. But I ought to have known you. You—are Dick Dynamo!"

"Dick what?" he said sharply.

"Dick Dynamo!" She repeated the name with absolute conviction, but she had begun to tremble. "Aunt Bobby is still waiting for you," she said.

"Who?" he said almost violently; and then, controlling himself as she shrank: "Oh, don't be frightened, child! Come here and tell me what you mean!"

She went, still trembling. He put out his hand and drew her close to him, looking at her searchingly.

"Why do you tell me I have never seen you before?" he said. "You are Bobby, aren't you? You couldn't be anyone else. You must forgive me for not knowing you. But it's a good many years ago since you threw me over, isn't it?"

His voice rang cold. She turned her face from his look. "She never threw you over," she whispered almost inarticulately. "She is waiting for you still."

"What do you mean?" he said.

With quivering lips she told him. "Bobby is my aunt. I—I am only Rosemary."

"Ah! Rosemary!" He caught at the name. "I used to call her that. It means Remembrance."

"She is my aunt," Rosemary told him again. "She has never forgotten you. We live near here—at Little Staple Farm—she and Aunt Matilda and I."

"Matilda!" he said. "Yes, I remember Matilda. But you—I don't quite see where you come in. Whose child are you?"

She lifted her head. "I was their brother's child," she said. "He died before I was born. My mother is dead too."

"Their brother!" said Dick Dynamo. "But—they never had a brother. It was the old man's one regret—'two lovely daughters but never a son.' "

"Oh, you're wrong!" Rosemary said quickly. "My father's name was Robert. He was Aunt Bobby's twin."

But the man beside her shook his head, and his face was set like granite. "There never was a son," he said.

"But I know it!" she persisted. "I am his child, I tell you! Oh, why do you look like that?" She drew herself away from him with swift misgiving. "Why do you?" she repeated. "Why do you? You—you couldn't have known them all."

"Oh yes, I knew them," he said. "I knew them very well. It may interest you to hear that Bobby—your aunt

as you call her—ruined my life. I see why now. Well, well!" He stopped abruptly and was silent for a space.

Rosemary bent down over the fire with the realization that she was very cold. His silence was like a stone wall, repelling her. She stretched her chill fingers to the blaze, feeling curiously shaken and unsure of herself.

The tension became unbearable at last. She forced herself to speak. "Why do you say that of Aunt Bobby? I'm sure she never gave you up. Why, she still wears your ring."

"Yes, she kept the ring," he said.

Something in his voice pierced her. She stood up and faced him. "And she has been true to you all these years!" she maintained. "Why have you kept her waiting so long? Why didn't you come back sooner?"

He made a sharp movement. His hand closed on her shoulder. "I'll tell you the truth," he said harshly, "because nothing but the truth will serve. Bobby was engaged to me long ago, but she wouldn't come abroad with me, and after I went she wrote and threw me over. She gave as her reason that she didn't care enough. And God knows anyway that was the truth. For now I came back and find—you!"

"Me!" gasped Rosemary in bewilderment.

"Don't you understand?" he said. "I always knew I had plenty of rivals, but I believed in her—I always believed in her. I thought at least she was virtuous! I didn't think her capable of—that!"

"Oh!" said Rosemary. She went backwards as though he had dealt her a stunning blow, groping for the mantelpiece for support; but her eyes remained on his face, searching it by the leaping firelight with an agonized in-

tensity. "Do you mean—do you mean—" she said—"that I am her—her—her child?"

Her voice failed on the last word; she could utter no more. She stood, white to the lips, waiting.

The man's face changed. He went to her, drew her very gently to him and held her.

"Oh, poor child!" he said. "Poor little Cinderella! That's broken the spell with a vengeance. Yes, I'm afraid that is what I mean. But lean on me! I'll help you—I'll see you through."

His voice and touch held nothing but kindness. She turned on the instant, turned and clung to him convulsively with a wild rush of tears.

"Oh, take me away!" she implored him brokenly. "Take me away! I can never go back. I'd rather go with you—anywhere."

CHAPTER IV

THE OLD BEAN

WHEN the lights went up again in the ball-room there was a general shout of laughter, for there were several who by accident or design had changed partners in the gloom and confusion, and the sorting that ensued caused a good deal of amusement. But there was one in that crowded hall who waited in vain for his partner to return to him. When the next dance started and couples began to drift to the supper-room, Percy Hudson was still threading his way backwards and forwards in search of her. Failing to find her, he lost his temper and solaced himself with another partner for a time—the young sister of the man with whom Rosemary had danced earlier in the evening, little Cecily Raymond who was deeply flattered by his attentions. He watched covertly for the return of Rosemary meanwhile in the hope that she would reappear in time to realize that he was by no means inconsolable. But still he watched in vain.

Eventually he proposed supper to his new partner who eagerly agreed. The Boxing Night Ball under her brother's chaperonage had not till then been a great success from her point of view, and she was just beginning to enjoy herself.

She was not a critical companion, and did not notice Percy's obvious abstraction during the meal that followed, but she did say to him when they finally returned

to the ball-room, "I suppose you'll have to go and dance with someone else now."

Percy glanced around him, failed to see the defaulter and, inwardly vowing vengeance upon her, made kind reply. "No, I can spare you a little longer if you like."

Cecily did like, and told him so artlessly, with flushed cheeks and shining eyes. It was so nice to have found a cavalier for herself.

Curiosity, however, prompted her to enquire if his former partner—"that pretty girl in the lovely bride's dress"—had gone home.

"Very likely," said Percy nonchalantly. "I really don't know. It doesn't much matter. You're a better dancer than she is, and look quite as nice."

Cecily swelled with pride. She herself was dressed in a dainty fairy costume of spangled muslin over which she had spent much thought, and it was gratifying to meet with appreciation, especially from one from whom she had expected no notice at all.

They continued to dance together, and Percy's bad temper began to pass under the influence of his young partner's obvious enjoyment. He ceased to search the room for Rosemary and, deciding that the time had come to give her a lesson, dismissed her from his mind as not worth worrying about. He found that Cecily was more than willing to continue to fill the gap, and the time passed quite pleasantly in her society. She did not have the disturbing effect that Rosemary had had upon him, and he felt no desire to make love to her or even to flirt; but, as he expressed it to himself, she was quite amusing for a kid, and her dancing suited his.

Thus engaged, he scarcely noticed the passing of the

hours, and it came as a surprise to him when Cecily's brother approached at the end of a dance and observed that they ought to be thinking of going.

Cecily uttered a moan of regret. "It has been such fun," she said.

"Oh, dash it!" Percy protested. "We can't stop yet!"

Cecily turned appealingly to her brother. "Can't we have one more go, Harry?" she said.

But he shook his head. "We really ought to get back. People are leaving. There's a deep snow, you know. Thank goodness, we haven't far to go!"

"You have!" said Cecily, turning back to Percy. "It's miles to Stapleton. How are you going to get back all that way? Or perhaps you are putting up in the town?"

"No, I'm not. I motored," said Percy, and his thoughts turned again to Rosemary. "I brought Miss Wendholme over. I wonder where she's got to. You seen her anywhere, Raymond?"

Raymond grinned. "No, she hasn't shown since supper. I've been watching out for her. She's given you the slip, what?"

Percy clenched his teeth. Rosemary certainly had behaved outrageously. "Well, she can't be far away," he said. "I can't go back without her."

"Perhaps she's gone back with someone else!" said Cecily comfortingly. "She may have left word at the door."

"There's no one to go with," said Percy.

Nevertheless he thought the idea worth following up, and was about to make his way to the entrance when she stayed him with a shy, "We shan't see you again, then?"

He turned back. "Well, I don't know. If I can't find

her, I shall try and get a bed in the town and go back in the morning. It's no fun negotiating those lanes in the dark in deep snow."

At this point Cecily prodded her brother and remarked, "I don't believe you'll get a bed anywhere in the town. They say the hotels are all full."

"You'd better come with us," said Harry Raymond, responding to the prod. "We can put you up and give you a bit of breakfast."

Cecily's bright eyes were on Percy's face, and perhaps they influenced him, for he replied with some enthusiasm. "I say, that's awfully decent of you! As a matter of fact, we very nearly broke down coming, and I'm not specially keen on trusting myself to that old bus again in a snow-storm. But I must just have a look round, and see if there's any sign of Miss Wendholme."

He departed with the words, while Cecily breathed, "Oh, I do hope he won't find her!"

"Well, we can't put them both up," remarked Harry Raymond.

"Oh no! I expect she's gone," said Cecily hopefully.

Percy was beginning to think the same, though why Rosemary should have deserted him thus was beyond his understanding. Fuming somewhat, he strode through the crowd of departing revellers, but she was not among them. He reached the outer door at length and had a glimpse of the white mantle of snow which had fallen during the earlier part of the night. There was a hubbub of departing cars below him, while above was a confusion of voices that laughed and shouted incessantly.

He looked for one of the doorkeepers, but they were occupied in summoning the cars and were out of reach.

He went down the steps into the still falling snow, and there at the foot he came upon a thick-set figure in an oil-stained leather coat and motor-goggles that struck him abruptly as familiar.

"Hullo!" he said.

Sharply the figure turned, and recognition was mutual.

"Hullo!" said The Old Bean. "I thought I should find you here. I've been waiting for you."

"What on earth for?" said Percy.

He spoke irritably, resentfully aware of a humiliating sense of guilt.

The Old Bean pushed up his goggles. People were jostling him on all sides, but he paid no attention to them. His green eyes looked steadily into Percy's.

"I just thought I'd come along on the old bike," he said. "Had a devil of a journey—only just managed to kick her along. Where's Rosemary?"

Percy's irritation increased. He had an urgent desire to turn on his heel and leave The Old Bean to his own devices. Convention, however, constrained him to make surly reply. "How should I know where she is?"

"Didn't you bring her here?" asked The Old Bean.

There was no evading the steady searching of his eyes or the perfectly reasonable insistence of his voice. Percy found himself compelled to make reply.

"Yes, she came with me certainly. But I lost sight of her ages ago. I haven't a notion where she is now."

"But aren't you going to take her back again?" questioned The Old Bean.

He spoke with absolute moderation, yet Percy turned on him with sudden savagery. "Yes, if I can find her. I

can't if I can't, can I? I don't know what you wanted to turn up for anyhow."

"I'll tell you if you like," said The Old Bean still temperately. "Just because I was a bit doubtful whether you were quite up to looking after her, and so on. Apparently you weren't, since she's given you the slip. How did you manage to lose sight of her?"

It was not often that Percy responded to the voice of authority without any effort at self-assertion, but on this occasion curiously he found himself compelled.

"We got separated—dancing," he growled. "It's hours ago now. She probably went off with another fellow. You know what she is."

"Oh yes, I know." The Old Bean spoke almost soothingly. "It's just what I expected. And haven't you done anything about finding her since?"

"No, I haven't," said Percy. "I didn't come here to play hide-and-seek. I came to dance."

"Oh, quite," said The Old Bean. "But I suppose you've finished now."

"Yes, and I'm going!" declared Percy defiantly. "She's no affair of mine. I tried to keep her with me and she wouldn't stay. She can jolly well look after herself, now, and get herself home again. I'm not going to hang about any longer."

"What are you going to do?" asked The Old Bean mildly.

Percy hesitated a moment during which shame and anger struggled for the mastery. Then anger triumphed.

"I'm going to look after myself," he said. "And I advise you to do the same. It was a pity you took the trouble to come on this wild-goose chase, for it's ten to one against

your getting back again to-night in this snow, and there isn't a bed to be had in the place."

"I don't want one, thanks," said The Old Bean. "I only want my car. Do you mind telling me where it is?"

Percy's flare of wrath died down again. "It's in the garage at *The King's Head*," he said. "You'll probably have to sleep in it. I'm going to the Raymonds' for the night."

"Have you got the ticket?" asked The Old Bean practically.

Percy produced it sullenly.

"Thanks!" said The Old Bean. "Well now, don't you worry any more about me! You'll find your old bike up against the market-cross. I don't suppose anyone will bother to pinch it, and you may want it to get home on in the morning. I'm just going to make sure she isn't still here, and after that I shall go round to *The King's Head*."

"You won't get in there," said Percy. "We had the greatest difficulty even in getting a room for her to change in. Someone had to lend it."

"Oh, really!" said The Old Bean, looking interested. "Do you know who?"

"How should I know?" growled Percy again. The Old Bean had never been so polite to him before, and for some reason he did not like it.

"All right," said The Old Bean equably. "One more thing, though. What was she wearing?"

For some reason Percy's anger flared forth afresh. "I don't see what business it is of yours. She isn't here now, so you are not likely to see her. She may have gone back and changed by this time."

"So she may," said The Old Bean mildly. "That's what I'm going to find out. How did you say she was dressed?"

"I said it was no damn' business of yours," fumed Percy.

"Yes, I heard you say that." Suddenly the politeness left The Old Bean's voice. His broad unromantic figure in the oil-stained coat seemed to grow taller. "But it doesn't matter what you say, because it is my business and I mean to know. So if you don't want to be rolled in the gutter you'd better answer."

Percy gave a gasp of utter astonishment. To be hectored by The Old Bean—of all people The Old Bean!—was an experience so novel that he felt as if some part of his mental adjustment must have turned turtle. He stared at him, too amazed to be angry.

"Go on!" commanded The Old Bean. "How was she dressed? Anything special?"

His face seemed to have changed also, to have grown older and harder. He looked at Percy with grim determination.

And Percy abandoned the contest, he could not have said wherefore. "She was dressed as a bride if you must know," he said. "But I don't know what you've got to lose your rag about. She's nothing to you."

"There you make a mistake," said The Old Bean sternly. "But it doesn't matter, as I said before. You can get along now to your friends, and go to bed in comfort."

The words were a dismissal. Percy turned and went up the steps, wondering why he had allowed himself thus tamely to be overridden. He also wondered what The

Old Bean had got to be angry about. It wasn't his fault that Rosemary had elected to leave him in the lurch, and even if it had been he could not see that The Old Bean had any right to be indignant with him. He felt in fact that he had been very badly treated, and vowed viciously as he went to rejoin the Raymonds that he would never again act the part of a cavalier to a girl of Rosemary's flighty tendencies. Cecily would certainly never have behaved like that.

As for The Old Bean, he abandoned his fruitless quest at the Town Hall forthwith, since it was quite obvious that the object thereof must eventually return to *The King's Head*, and thither he now turned his steps through the trampled snow with the dour resolve to spend every ounce of his substance if need be in finding her.

CHAPTER V

THE CALL OF A FRIEND

"O God, bring her back to me! Bring her back!"

Through nights and days of fruitless wandering that prayer hung upon Bobby's lips, and while her body agonized in fiery suffering such as she had never before dreamed of, her spirit went from one darkness to another on its eternal quest. Of the physical pain that racked her she took small note. It was all part of that hell of vain endeavour to which it seemed she had been condemned. Sometimes indeed, she fought it with all her strength, struggling against overwhelming odds to overthrow the barrier that separated her from her darling. But always there were arms of pitiless strength, holding her back. At other times, brokenly and with tears, she would entreat to be allowed her freedom to pursue that endless search.

"I must go myself," she would plead wistfully to that compelling force that restrained her. "She might hide from anyone but me. But I know—I know she would come to me when once I was within reach. My little baby-girl! My Rosemary!"

But all her prayers and strivings were in vain. She could not pass the barrier.

Sometimes there came periods of exhaustion when she could not strive, long spaces of nerveless inertia when pain

alone held sway. At such times as these, when life was at its lowest ebb, there would come to her the long heave and roll of the Eternal as it were a sea of infinite blankness waiting to engulf her, and all she had ever known of life and all she had believed of immortality hovered on the edge of an immense and terrifying abyss into which her very individuality was about to be hurled. Stark terror held her then because she knew that in that awful void she might wander for ever and ever in anguish of soul and never again find the remotest link that could re-connect her with the world she knew—the world in which Rosemary would some day so sorely need her.

In those terrible hours of blind weakness, prayer was an impossibility to her; but sometimes, feebly aware of a human presence vaguely near her, she would gasp a piteous request that someone would pray in her stead. For a long time that plea of hers went unanswered, but in the end out of the darkness there came a voice that prayed and hands that gathered and held her own.

“Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee,
E'en though it be a Cross
That raiseth me. . . .”

Sometimes the voice would tremble a little, but it always went bravely on again:

“Still all my song shall be,
Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee!”

In all her anguish those words never failed to reach and comfort Bobby—to open out the way to her, as it

were. Struggling on like the wanderer in the darkness, some faint gleam of light would come like a far-distant torch shining dimly over the desert of her night, and the awful void would recede before it, leaving her a measure of peace.

It was possible that at these times she slept, but it was never for long, and with the first feeble renewal of strength the old futile striving would return, the restlessness that nothing could still, the eternal urging within her to search the length and breadth of the world for her lost treasure. And so on again from one darkness to another in a fiery anguish of yearning that nothing could ever satisfy or quench.

It wore her down, that wandering, until at last the power to struggle further went from her, and there came a time when for a space all conscious existence ceased. That time was for Bobby the dividing of two eras in her life. When it passed, all illusions passed with it. She came to herself as one emptied of all that she had ever possessed, completely weak, helpless as an infant, but aware—in some ways acutely aware—of all that was passing around her. She could neither move nor speak, such was the state to which her long agony had brought her. Neither could she suffer intensely any more. She could only lie helpless, feebly breathing, feeling that even that was beyond her strength, an exertion that caused her the most deadly weariness she had ever known.

Very near to death was Bobby in those days, and she knew it, but was no longer afraid. For her the darkness was past. Suffering had taught her that even the grief she had endured was but a "light affliction." By a means wholly unfathomable but beyond all question, she knew

herself to be nearer to God. It was as though a door had been opened to her tired soul, admitting her to a quiet sanctuary, and loss and pain had been shut outside. She did not mind the thought of death any more. She did not grieve for Rosemary. She knew in the depths of her being that in some fashion inexplicable to her all would be well. She viewed life no longer by ordinary standards; but as from an immense height and as though by a flashlight from the Eternal suddenly thrown upon the little span of mortality in which she still lingered, she saw the ultimate end of pain and sin—the gradual but certain renewal of all things into which God had breathed the Breath of Life. She saw the fires of suffering producing the perfect gold. . . .

Someone came to her and knelt beside her, clasping the hand she was too weak to raise. She looked into the dark, rough-hewn face of Silas Hickory, and very feebly smiled a recognition. She was glad to have Silas near her. She would never forget that trusty friend of hers.

He did not speak, only knelt there watching her with eyes of grave intentness. There were lines on his face which she had never noticed before. He looked as if he had not slept for a very long time, and a strange impulse to comfort him arose within her. With a great effort she stirred the fingers that he held and weakly pressed his hand.

In a moment his expression changed. His eyes softened, and she saw his smile. The next instant he stooped and laid his face down upon her wrist.

When he looked up again she saw that his lips were oddly trembling. He spoke to her in a whisper.

“Hold on, Bobby!—Hold on—for God’s sake!”

She knew what he meant. Her brain was crystal-clear just then. She knew that he was imploring her to cling to the chain that bound her to mortal life—that chain that had worn so thin in the long struggle. For some reason which for the moment eluded her, he did not want her to go. He could not see what she saw—the complete insignificance of worldly things. He had not reached the heights on which she stood—or realized the wonders that lay beyond.

She wanted to tell him so, but she lacked the strength for speech. Already she was turning from the fading vista that lay behind her to the infinitely greater prospect that lay before. She had no desire to linger. She wanted to go on into the vast Eternity unhampered by earthly burdens. Her spirit was slowly but surely freeing itself from all restraining shackles, like a bright-winged insect newly-born to the sunlight out of depths unknown.

The thought of turning back was repugnant to her, yet like a rising cloud it grew and spread upon her horizon, dimming the glory that had begun to dawn upon her. She had the feeling of someone calling to her, desperately holding her back, frantically needing her. Silas it was—not Rosemary! Had it been Rosemary she would have turned without question and left the heights to minister to her. But Silas—surely Silas had no right to hamper her thus!

Yet there he was, kneeling beside her, clasping her cold hand, brokenly praying her to hold on to the little futile mortal existence of which she was so weary.

"Only try!" he was saying. "I'll help you. See! I am holding you. I will take all your troubles and burdens, and you shall never suffer again."

Vain promises! She knew them as such, yet she did not smile. Who could smile at the anguish of a child wildly offering up everything within its scope of thought that it might not be deprived of the only thing that mattered? Only pity and that growing desire to comfort stirred in answer to his cry, and again very weakly she pressed his hand. If only—oh, if only—she might have gone into peace!

But—the cloud grew and spread—the distant peaks of Eternity began to fade. The hand that clung, the voice that called, gradually filled her consciousness with the knowledge that something yet remained for her to do ere the Vision could be fulfilled. Slowly, with an unspeakable regret, she turned back to the shadows she had so nearly left behind. . . .

"You will try to get better!" urged the low voice beside her. "You will stay!"

It came upon her, listening to that earnest entreaty, that perhaps after all he had some right to ask—her staunch and loyal friend who had never before asked aught of her save to be allowed to serve her. And he did not know what he was asking of her, never would realize until his own time came how great was the sacrifice to her.

The habit of service was very strong upon her. For many years she had surrendered herself to it. Through an apprenticeship which had not been without its bitterness she had attained the measure of ease which comes from long practice. It had become second nature with her to serve the needs of others, and her own needs had been put aside. It was that habit which influenced her now. The cry for help had never been passed unheeded by her. She could not pass it now. Inexplicable as it

might be, here was someone who needed her, and from such she could not turn away. Certainly he had the right to ask. He was the only friend who had ever offered her help in all the long hard years.

Because of that, her spirit stirred in answer. Because of that, she put away her own desire and faced the darkness again.

Feebly, with fluttering breath, she spoke. "Yes—Silas—I will—stay."

He would never know what it cost her, and that glimpse of the Eternal had already taught her that life and death were so merged together that the Infinite was but "a step into the open air." Regret faded with the glory that had barely begun to dawn as she turned back again at the call of a friend.

CHAPTER VI

A HEAP OF ASHES

IN after days it seemed to Bobby that the way back was infinitely the hardest part, even though active suffering had ceased. The awful weakness that hampered her—grim toll of many years of working beyond her strength—was very often more than her brave spirit could support, and she would lie with the tears running down her face, not knowing why she wept.

It was at such times that Mary—dear, wholesome Mary Flight—was so invaluable. A cup of tea was her usual remedy, accompanied by a few commonplace words of encouragement. Mary never pried into causes and effects. She took things exactly as they came. The poor soul was feeling down; well, well, she would be better presently. It was only natural after all she had gone through. And having administered the tea and seen the flow of tears temporarily checked, she would go off to her kitchen to give a bottle of milk to the motherless lamb that Peter had placed under her care.

Presently she would come back again with a half-knitted stocking and sit beside Bobby's bed for a spell, commenting on the lamb's progress or the way Peter wore out his heels which was enough in itself to keep any woman busy. A comfortable chuckle always accompanied this remark. To work for Silas and Peter had been Mary's dearest privilege for as long as she could remem-

ber. But Peter was a more constant theme than Silas, mainly because he was a more ordinary person. Of Silas she always spoke with a certain reverent reticence. Bobby used to reflect whimsically that if Mary owned Peter, as from her talk she certainly appeared to do, Silas was supreme owner of them both. In fact from the tiny radius of her bedside it almost seemed as if he owned the universe. She had never realized before the far-reaching importance of his personality. He seemed to dominate the whole atmosphere. And this she gathered rather from Mary's silences than from her general confidences. It was very evident that her respect for Silas was one of the guiding rules of her life.

She never spoke of Bobby's affairs, and for a time Bobby lacked the strength to open the matter. She was utterly incapable of effort, and Dr. Bellamy's fussy visits were usually as much as she could bear without any added agitation. He told her that Matilda was well and asking after her; but of Rosemary he said no word, and Bobby could not bring herself to question him. She generally lay inert for a long time after his departure, feeling that every spark of vitality was quenched. And it was lying thus that there came to her one day the memory of the strong hand that had supported her through the long hours of darkness, and she exerted herself to ask a pathetic question of placid, round-faced Mary, sewing by her side.

"Why does Silas never come to see me now?"

"Do you want him?" said Mary, on her feet in a moment. "Why, of course he'll come; I'll go and get him."

Bobby would have stayed her, but she was already gone.

Evidently her orders on this point had been very explicit.

In a few minutes she heard a step that was not Mary's, and lifted her heavy eyes to meet Silas's grave look. He sat down beside her and took her hand, and a warmth went through her at his touch that seemed to impart strength to her tired spirit.

"Thank you for coming," she murmured.

"I will always come when you want me," he said.

"Thank you," she said again; and then, with an effort, "May I ask you a few things?"

There was a brief pause before he replied, and she had a vague impression that he was bracing himself for some ordeal. Yet, when he answered, his voice was perfectly steady and assured.

"I will tell you everything in my power," he said.

She knew that he would be true to his word, and that she need fear no subterfuge from him; but—perhaps it was that very knowledge—something deterred her from taking immediate advantage of the fact. It may have been that, aware of her own weakness, she instinctively sought to spare herself.

"I want to know," she said, "first, what Dr. Bellamy thinks about me."

Silas's big hand closed more firmly around her wasted one. "He says that you ought to be getting well by now," he said. "But of course that's bunkum, and I told him so. You've had too much to bear."

His voice had a resentful note, and she faintly smiled. "He always thought I had the strength of ten," she said.

"I believe you thought so too—once," said Silas.

She turned her wan face to him. "It was only—make-believe," she said very sadly.

He bent towards her. "That's over now," he said.
"Don't ever forget that!"

"Thank you," she whispered again, and there fell a silence between them while she gathered her strength for further effort.

"Don't let me stay too long!" said Silas gently at length.

Her fingers stirred in his, softly clasping. "Please don't go!" she said. "I want to know—much more."

But still she did not ask the question which of all others she had sent for him to answer. She could not.

"There's plenty of time," said Silas.

She became aware of the pity in his eyes, and flinched a little. "Tell me about—Matilda!" she said.

The pity vanished in a second, and a certain sternness took its place. "I believe she is as well as usual," he said. "She is staying at the Vicarage."

"Ah!" murmured Bobby. "That is good of them."

"I don't think they had much choice," remarked Silas dryly. "I would have had her here, but that didn't appeal to her."

"You have done too much for us without that," said Bobby. And after a pause: "I shall try to get well quickly now. We can't go on—living on our friends like this."

There was more of her old spirit in her speech than in any of her previous utterances. Perhaps it was for that reason that he suffered it to pass unchallenged.

"Get well—yes!" was all he said.

Bobby's eyes were lifted to his with a wistful gratitude. "I shall never forget what you have done for me, Silas," she said.

He leaned nearer to her. She saw that he was deeply moved. "You've nothing whatever to thank me for," he said. "I don't even know if I've done right."

She understood his meaning and smiled at him. "Yes, it was right," she said. "I am glad now that I came back. There is still work for me to do."

"You're not going to slave to support Matilda any longer," he said with blunt force.

"I wasn't thinking of her just then," she said. "I was thinking—I was thinking——"

"I know what you were thinking," he said, as she halted. "And that's why I tell you that I don't know that I did right. Bobby, you asked me that night to find her for you. My dear, I didn't—because I couldn't. I wouldn't have left you in that state in any case. Will you ever manage to forgive me, I wonder?"

"There—is nothing to forgive," she said, but she spoke faintly and her breathing became suddenly very rapid.

The deathly pallor of her face alarmed him. He got up and went to the table for a restorative. But when he came back she made a brave attempt to smile at him.

"Please—please—" she said, "finish! Tell me—all you know!"

"Drink this first!" he said, stooping over her. "I will then, I promise."

She obeyed him without protest; but while she drank, her eyes were raised to his, beseeching him. When she had finished, he set down the glass and sat beside her again to answer their entreaty.

"This is all I know," he said, and as he spoke her hand came weakly to his again, as though seeking strength. "Rosemary went with Percy Hudson to the Boxing Night

Ball at Bode. She got separated from him in some sort of revel and disappeared. He spent the night with the Raymonds and came back the day after without seeing her again."

"Is that all?" gasped Bobby.

"No. That isn't quite all. There was a man staying at *The King's Head* who lent his room for her to change in." Silas's voice was grimly unemotional. "That man also disappeared that night. No one saw him go, but he left a note for the landlord to tell him to apply to his solicitor for the settlement of his bill. He also left a note of instructions for his solicitor—young Raymond of Bode. Whether Rosemary was with him or not is not definitely known. The police have not been asked to trace her, as your sister would not authorize it and you were too ill to ask. But it is evident that she returned to the room to change as the dress she had worn at the ball was found there packed in a suit-case addressed to your sister."

"To Matilda!" interjected Bobby. "But why?"

"I presume it was her property," said Silas.

"But how could it have been?" said Bobby. "Matilda has no ball-dress."

"I heard from the landlord of *The King's Head* that she went to the ball with young Hudson, dressed as a bride," said Silas.

"Ah!" A light seemed to break upon Bobby. "Yes—yes, that was Matilda's," she murmured. And then, with resolution, "is that all you know? Can't you tell me the name of the man?"

"Yes, I can tell you that," Silas said, but he spoke with reluctance. His grasp of Bobby's hand was very firm.

"But remember, she may not be in his company at all! We may be on a wrong scent."

"Tell me!" whispered Bobby faintly.

Very steadily he complied. "The man had been staying at *The King's Head* under a feigned name—so it now transpires. I believe he called himself Graves. In reality he was the new Lord Ravencombe, just home from Mexico."

"Lord Ravencombe!" The name was scarcely audible on Bobby's lips.

"Yes. Young Raymond let it out." Gravely Silas brought his story to a finish. "He knows very little about him. He never expected to succeed or to return to England. But there seem to have been a good many deaths in the family, and he is almost the last of the race."

"Didn't you tell me you were—one of them?" questioned Bobby. Her brows were drawn as though by physical pain and she spoke with difficulty.

"I believe I may describe myself as quite the last," said Silas briefly.

"And you know—nothing of him?" Her low voice held a pleading note.

"Nothing whatever beyond his name," said Silas. "I have never met him. I am afraid that side of the family has never interested me."

"And has nobody—done—anything?" whispered Bobby piteously.

"Yes." Silas spoke with a measure of relief. It had been no light task to answer those low questions of hers. "There is one person who is trying to trace her, and from what I have heard of him he will probably succeed.

Young Ross—a friend of Percy Hudson's—you probably know him——”

“Ah! That Scotch boy!” Breathlessly she caught at the news. “Is his name Ross? They called him The Old Bean. I believe—it is possible—he was attracted by Rosemary.”

“He is looking for her,” said Silas. “And I think he means to find her. From things I've heard, he seems the sort of fellow that wouldn't stop till he did.”

“Oh, Silas!” Bobby's eyes were brimming with tears. “And is there no other possible chance of finding her? Must she be left to a comparative stranger like that?”

“I don't know,” Silas said, and for the first time his eyes avoided hers. “It's difficult to know what else to do. She may be at the other side of the world by now.”

“Silas!” Bobby's voice was barely audible, yet something in its tone brought his eyes back to hers. “Help me—to sit up!” she said.

He put his arm behind her pillows, raising her.

“Thank you,” she whispered, and with the word her other hand came out and clasped his. “Silas,” she said, “I have—something to say to you—a great favour to ask.”

Her eyes looked straight into his; they seemed to be burning in their deep hollows.

“I will do it,” said Silas steadily.

Her fingers closed with a convulsive pressure. “Wait!” she said. “You wanted me for a partner once, and I refused. I offer myself to you now as a servant, and everything I have in Little Staple as well as myself to be unconditionally yours, if you will help me—if you will only help me—to find my Rosemary. When once

she is found I will never ask anything more of you. I will only serve you faithfully as long as I live, and not even for her sake will I ever turn aside from that."

"Oh, stop!" Silas said; his voice was deep, it sounded almost rough. "Stop! Don't you know I will do everything in my power for you without that?"

"You shan't do everything for nothing," she made answer. "Silas, do you realize I have no money? Only the farm produce to sell, and that is half Matilda's!"

"That doesn't matter," he said. "I have money put by, and I can make more. You shall have every penny of it."

She caught her breath. "Oh, you shouldn't!" she said. "You shouldn't!" And suddenly she was crying against his shoulder with a piteous helplessness, the while she still clung to his hand. "Silas,—you shouldn't!"

"Don't—don't!" he said. "You'll be ill. Shouldn't what? I don't understand."

"Shouldn't give so much—care so much," she sobbed incoherently. "It isn't fair—or right! You lose—every time!"

"Lose!" Silas's voice came muffled but very deep as he held the little wasted form close. "Do you think if I lost everything I have in the world and gained you—I could be—a loser?"

"Oh yes!" she breathed. "Yes! What am I? A burnt-out fire! A heap of ashes!"

"You are—more than my own life to me," he said.

And there he stopped, for it seemed there were no words to carry him further. Only in the silence that followed he took out his own handkerchief and with infinite tenderness he dried her tears.

When he spoke again, his voice was normal, even

matter-of-fact. "When you are well enough," he said, "we will go together and look for her. I shall set everything in order and leave Peter in charge. Now I am going to fetch Mary."

He laid her gently back and stood up. There was a curious wistfulness in his gaze to which almost instinctively she found herself making reply. "I shall soon be well enough," she said, and her own brave smile showed for an instant with the words.

His look scarcely altered as he turned away. "Get well—yes," he said again.

CHAPTER VII

ARCADIA

"YES, it's very wonderful," said Rosemary. "Just like a dream—only I never dreamt of anything like this."

"One has to see it first," said the man beside her lazily.

He was lying stretched out at full length on the short grass with his hat so arranged over his face as to shield it from the hot sun and enable him to watch his companion at the same time.

She was not looking at him. Her eyes were fixed upon the almost indigo blue of the sea far below them. From somewhere in the magic distance there came the sound of mule-bells, tinkling fitfully along the precipitous road which wound above the shore but which was entirely hidden by cypress-trees from her high perch on the hill. Her blue eyes had a brooding intent look, as though they searched for something which they did not expect to find. She wore a broad-brimmed hat, and under it her face was deeply flushed with a peach-like bloom that intensified her beauty astoundingly. The Rosemary of Little Staple had been a vision to remember—exquisite as an opening bud; but the Rosemary who sat on the hill above the sunlit Italian shore glowed with a dazzling loveliness that was very near to perfection. The warm vitality of her was like an aura spreading outwards in sheer radiance. Yet her eyes gazed forth to the horizon as if they sought the unattainable.

On the dark face of the man who watched her there rested a whimsical half-speculative look. It held conscious power and yet a certain hesitancy. He might have been a hunter in possession of a priceless trophy which he preferred to tame rather than to destroy. It was always thus that he regarded her, sometimes appraisingly, sometimes even with compassion, but he never seemed to tire of the vision.

"I wonder what you are looking for," he said presently.

He had said it to her before and she had not answered. A certain reticence had developed in her since that night, now three weeks ago, when the gates of childhood had closed behind her and she had fared forth into an unknown world with an unknown companion to guide her. She had never asked to go back or spoken of that which lay behind. But the wistfulness had begun to grow in her eyes of late, and there were times when she seemed to withdraw into herself as if she would fain hide her soul from the scrutiny of those eyes which so perpetually watched her. Her instinct was to avoid all intimate talk, and during their travels she had no difficulty in doing so. It was only when they came to a halting-place, as now, that she was aware of any effort on his part to draw nearer to her. He had never attempted to make love to her since that night that she had thrown herself upon his mercy. And yet she knew with an odd certainty that he was merely biding his time. His absolute and unvarying self-control did not deceive her on that point. She realized that some day, when he judged the right moment to have arrived, he would demand more of her, and that she would have no choice but to yield. Sometimes the thought brought a knocking of fear to her heart, but she

always put it from her. For she had taken her own road and there could be no return. And even yet the glamour had not wholly faded. His personality had a dominant quality which held her as it were in spite of herself. He was not the prince of her dreams, as for a very brief period she had imagined. He was Aunt Bobby's rejected lover. Yet by a strange magnetism he still held her. On the night of the ball she had been dazzled, and to a certain extent she was dazzled yet, just as the mind may remain affected by a dream in waking hours. But he did not stand for romance in her soul. The Dick Dynamo of other days—the man she had pictured long ago—was of a very different type, though in some respects possessing the same characteristics. There had been no cynical disillusionment about him. He had been of a fiery and ardent temperament, and capable of kindling ardour in others. This man was world-weary and inclined to sneer at life. She even pitied him at times; he seemed to have missed so much. He never talked freely of the years that lay behind him. Yes, he had been in Mexico, had dabbled in politics and been badly stung on one or two occasions. Yes, there had been a few breezes. The Mexican climate was given to that sort of thing. One lived by one's wits more or less. Sometimes one was in irons and sometimes in clover. That old scar of his? Oh yes, that had been quite a decent wound once. He had been able to show his back teeth like a dog. It had been just one of their little shows, and he flattered himself he had come out of it rather well. Anyhow the feminine element had not seemed to consider his charms greatly impaired thereby. He always spoke of women with a sort of scoffing indulgence, much as one might speak of

jewels of trumpery value; never with bitterness. The only woman of whom he had uttered a word of disparagement was Bobby, and since that first night he had never mentioned her name. The door of memory which had then been opened for the first time in many years had been closed again and sealed. And Rosemary would not have dared to tamper with that door even had she so desired. But her own inclination also was to hold her peace on that subject, though she sometimes felt as if her heart were bleeding beneath her silence now that the novelty of this strange wandering life had begun to wear away. The dream was passing and reality was coming upon her. Kind as was her new guardian, he did not fill those inner spaces in which Bobby's tenderness had flourished. She did not find herself fondly cherished and sheltered on every side from the faintest shadow of harm. The utter devotion upon which she had thrived from babyhood was lacking now. He did not pretend to be in love with her, this care-worn, cynical man of the world. There might be passion somewhere locked behind that mask-like front, but not the pure white flame of Love. Aunt Bobby had loved her, had prayed for her, was probably praying still. This was a thought which always wrenched at Rosemary's heart. For she had wholly ceased to pray herself since those gates had closed behind her. All the foundations of her inner life had seemed to give way when her faith in Bobby had been shattered. Her dependence upon her had been as vital to her as the blood in her veins. That Bobby could possibly be other than she had always professed to be was so amazing, so staggering, a thought that she had gone down before it. But for the novelty of her present ex-

periences, there would have been nothing left to her. The world for Rosemary had become a place of terrible possibilities and she dared not let herself think too much. She was as one adrift in great waters, no longer attempting to steer a course, merely clinging to her raft with a frantic hope that by some means she might eventually succeed in reaching safety. She fought desperately to keep herself from thinking of the one beloved who had so cruelly failed her, but often the result of her efforts was a despairing flood of tears as soon as she was alone. She would lie in the dark at night and writhe in bitterness of soul, trying to stem those tears of agony, fighting as it were for her very life against the overwhelming grief that could not always be kept at bay. It was like a gnawing hunger within her, sapping youth and vitality alike—a hunger that nothing could ever satisfy. She had begun to face the fact that the sheer unsullied joy of life could never be hers again. The power of enjoyment seemed to have gone from her, her sky to be permanently overcast. And so she sat in the radiant Italian sunshine and brooded, with her eyes upon the horizon. She had given herself into the hands of a stranger, but everyone—even Aunt Bobby—had become a stranger to her now. It was useless to attempt to scan the future. All was dark before her. Equally useless to look back along the course she had traversed—that course over which there could be no return! She could only cling to her spar and float till another storm should arise and—perchance—overwhelm her utterly. It was a desperate predicament and she tried not to contemplate it too closely. He had been kind to her hitherto; perhaps he would continue to be kind. But all feeling of security was gone, and only her

homesick longing for Bobby remained—a tragic sense of loss which haunted her like a spectre that none other could see.

She became aware that her companion had spoken to her for the third time, and almost guiltily she turned her eyes away from the glittering stretch of deep blue sea.

"I am not looking for anything," she said.

"You look like a ship-wrecked mariner on a desert island," he said, with lazy humour, "searching the skyline for a sail."

She suppressed a shiver. He had an uncanny fashion of expressing her feelings at times which made her feel like an open book, the pages of which he turned idly and at random for his own private amusement.

He saw her momentary discomfiture and smiled. "A bull's eye, was it? Well, after all, the desert island isn't such a bad place. Some people even might call it Arcadia. And it seems to suit you all right. You get lovelier every day."

He proffered this compliment much as an indulgent nurse might dangle a sugar-plum in front of a child who showed signs of fractiousness. A vague impatience stirred within Rosemary. Why did he always treat her as a child?

"You don't think much of women, do you?" she said, almost in spite of herself.

"Nothing whatever," said Dick Dynamo; and then he laughed. There was something disarming about his laugh which comforted her. "It doesn't matter what I think, does it?" he said.

"I suppose it does to you," said Rosemary.

"Oh, to me!" She was aware of an edge in his words

which made them less reassuring than his laugh had been. "No, quite honestly, I don't think anything matters very much to me—not even my own opinion. It's the penalty of age, you know, Rosemary. You'll come to it one day."

Rosemary nodded understanding. She felt near to it already. "I expect I shall," she said. "One lives and learns."

"One does indeed," said Dick Dynamo; and added the next moment, still half-laughing, "I wonder how much you have learnt in the past three or four weeks that you never wot of before."

The colour rose in her face. "I don't know," she said, as he waited for a reply. "It's hard to realize how ignorant I used to be."

"Which do you find the most blissful," he asked, "ignorance or knowledge?"

"I don't know," she said again. "But one's got to have knowledge, hasn't one?"

He made a wry face. "Applied with the rod of adversity, eh?"

"I don't suppose all knowledge is like that," said Rosemary.

"Oh no, there is the pleasant variety," he assured her. "Italy for instance! You are learning Italy under conditions that you never dreamed of. You can't say that Italy is an altogether unpleasant proposition."

"Oh no!" said Rosemary, and she spoke with emphasis. "I love Italy. I wish—I wish I had been born here."

"You wouldn't be nearly so attractive if you had been," he said.

"I should have been much happier," declared Rosemary.

"Ah! You are not very happy now, are you?" he said.

Her colour deepened under his eyes. "That isn't your fault," she murmured almost under her breath.

"Are you sure it isn't?" he said.

She avoided his look for a moment or two; then with resolution she met it. "Quite sure," she said.

"Does that mean it isn't in my power to give you happiness?" he questioned.

She hesitated.

"Don't mind me!" he urged gently. "I haven't started in to try very hard yet, you know."

Something in his tone moved her. Her eyes filled with tears and she turned her face away. "It isn't you," she said.

She was bitterly ashamed of her emotion and fought to control it. He had been kindness itself to her and she felt it was rank ingratitude to suffer him to imagine that he had not succeeded in giving her happiness. But for some reason the tears persisted, and in a moment she got up and moved away, realizing that they must be conquered in solitude.

He made no attempt to follow her, and though she was thankful that he did not, she wondered if it meant that he was offended.

The brilliant sunshine seemed to mock her as she wandered down the hill. The dancing water might have been a mirage. She came to a spot where the rocky path took a sharp curve, and here in the corner were some trodden uneven steps that led up to a shrine. Within the niche was a crucifix rudely carved. Before it was a small

pitcher containing roses. They had evidently been placed there in the early morning, and now they were wilting in the noonday heat. Their scent came to her as she paused.

Something drew her, she knew not what. As though a Hand had been laid upon her, she moved towards that roughly-fashioned shrine. Reaching the steps, she paused again. This was where the peasants knelt to pray. Did they go empty away, she wondered? She wished again, passionately, that she were as one of them. At least they had a measure of faith. A sudden agony caught at her heart. Why had she lost hers? In the old days, kneeling by Aunt Bobby's side, no troubrous questionings had ever arisen within her. In a fashion Bobby's faith had seemed to suffice for them both. She had been so sure that Bobby's pure spirit was safely anchored in reality. But now all that was gone, since Bobby had cheated her. She was left stranded and alone in a world of unimaginable desolation, a world in which only evil flourished.

Yet still she stood before the Shrine of Suffering, waiting—waiting for a sign.

She never knew afterwards how it happened. There was no visible influence at work. No voice or touch or vision came to her. But after a space of which she had no reckoning, she suddenly found herself kneeling on the stone. The pitcher was pushed aside, the roses were fallen from it, and she was bowed forward, weeping, her two hands clutching desperately at the base of the Cross.

Words—words which Aunt Bobby had tenderly taught her long ago—fell piteously from her lips. She did not know why she uttered them.

“Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy Cross I cling . . .”

The Cross! The Cross! This was what it meant then to be made perfect through suffering. Kneeling there in utter helplessness, it came to her as by a great flash of illumination.

And something else came to her also—something that she had never known before—was it an actual Presence by her side?—or a still small Voice that spoke within?

She knew not. Only—when It was past—she lifted her face in wonderment and knew that the ground whereon she knelt was holy.

Later she picked up the fallen roses and replaced them in their jar,—smelt them—kissed them—and softly went away.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MIRROR

THAT afternoon, sitting under the awning that sheltered the *façade* of a dream hotel, looking forth upon a dream sea of purest, deepest blue, Rosemary made a suggestion which frankly astounded her companion.

"I think," she said, "I should like to go into a convent."

"Gracious Heaven!" said Dick Dynamo, and after that said no more while his cigarette lasted.

Then, having with capable brown fingers removed the end from the holder, he tossed it away, and spoke.

"You can't do that," he said.

"Why not?" said Rosemary.

He gave her an odd look. "You haven't done anything to deserve it," he said.

Her brow contracted a little. "One isn't obliged to be wicked first," she said. "It's for the people who are tired and want to hide as well."

"Does that describe your case?" he asked.

She nodded thoughtfully. "I want to learn to be good," she said.

"You haven't learnt to be anything else yet," he pointed out.

"I'm afraid one doesn't want much teaching in that way," said Rosemary with a sigh.

"You're very young," said Dick Dynamo.

Thereafter he was silent for a space, watching her as was his wont, a certain shrewd amusement in his eyes.

He spoke at last, but more to himself than to her. "No, I'm not going to let you bury yourself in a convent. You're too good for that. I think I know what your trouble is." He addressed her now definitely. "You're homesick."

She did not contradict him. The very word "home" seemed to bring her heart into her throat. Aunt Bobby—Little Staple—all that she had once held so lightly—rose in a flash before her. All that had once been hers and would never be hers again!

What could he know about it—this man with the iron-grey hair and cynical, worn features? He had travelled the world for years for his own amusement. What could the word mean to him?

"Whatever I am," she said, speaking with difficulty as he seemed to expect some sort of answer to his challenge, "it's no good talking about it, because I can't go back."

He smiled at that in a way she did not understand. There were many things she did not understand about him. "You can certainly go back if you want to," he said.

She felt herself turn scarlet. "Oh no, I couldn't—I couldn't!" she said.

"Why not?" he questioned lazily. "Do you think I should prevent you?"

"No—no!" She began to stammer in desperate confusion. "You are—much too kind—to—to want to keep me—against my will. It's only—what everyone would

be saying—and—and—" Bobby's name was on her lips, but she could not utter it; she plunged into quivering silence.

He did not seem to notice her agitation; she had noticed before that he was strangely blind at times. "What would everyone be saying?" he asked.

Rosemary uttered a half-choked sound of distress. "You must—know," she faltered.

"My dear child," he said, "I merely wanted to find out if you did. You mean that everyone within a radius of ten miles or so of your old home is suffering from pious shock because you are travelling in my company unchaperoned. Is that it?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Do you think they know?" he proceeded.

"They would know—if I went back," she said.

"Not unless you told them," he argued. "It's a very unlikely story, after all. I rather doubt if they'd believe it if you did."

"They'd probably believe—something worse," said Rosemary, with burning cheeks.

"They probably would," he agreed. "It's an uncharitable world, isn't it? But that being the case, why worry? Surely you are happier where you are!"

"I know I ought to be," said Rosemary, "but—but—" with a great effort she brought out the words—"it isn't only oneself that counts, is it? If—if—I went into a convent, I could write to them then, and say I was safe."

"You can write to them now and say the same, if you so wish," he remarked somewhat dryly.

"Oh no, I couldn't," she said again. "I couldn't!"

He took out his cigarette-case, and she felt with relief

that his look was no longer upon her. "It would be strictly true," he said.

"I couldn't," she repeated.

He began to smoke again thoughtfully.

"I wonder," he said presently, "excluding the convent idea of course, what you would most like to do."

"I think I ought to work for my living," said Rosemary. She spoke in a low voice but with more assurance than before. His manner gave her a measure of confidence. "You see, I always have worked. I'm used to it."

He threw her a brief glance. "Yes? What sort of work?" he said.

She hesitated. It was difficult to make him see life as she had always seen it hitherto.

"One was always busy on the farm, you know," she said.

"Who ran the farm?" asked Dick Dynamo.

It was the first time he had betrayed any interest in her past existence. She felt as if a definite command had been laid upon her to lift the curtain and show him the world in which she had moved up to the time of her amazing flight with him.

She complied with an effort, but as she proceeded she was surprised to find the task less difficult than she had thought. She knew that he was listening intently. "Aunt Bobby ran it," she said, and, once uttered, her lips no longer faltered at the name. "She has done it for years. Grandpa was alive at first, then he died and we still went on at Little Staple, she and Aunt Matilda and I."

"Is your Aunt Matilda married?" he put in.

"No, oh no, she never married," said Rosemary, "but she must have been thinking of it once, for that bride's

dress I wore was made for her. But she never did anything on the farm. She was too delicate, and besides, she never wanted to. Aunt Bobby did all the work. I used to help a little, not much; but I had my lessons to do."

"Who taught you?" he said.

"Aunt Bobby." Rosemary's voice quivered a little; the vision of Aunt Bobby's sweet flushed face bent over her ironing while she sat on the window-seat and repeated her French poetry rose before her. "She made me work very hard at them. But she worked much harder herself. She never rested."

"Was the farm a success?" he asked.

Rosemary was a little vague. "The pigs were, I think," she said. "I don't know much about the rest. Oh yes, the eggs were too. And she used to make butter. But there was never any money to spare. I suppose it all went in rent."

"Oh, she didn't own the farm then?" His voice had a casual ring, yet she knew that he was interested.

"Oh no. That belonged to Silas Hickory." The old jealous resentment sounded in the words, and her companion turned his head and surveyed her. "He was always in and out. I think he helped quite a lot over the pigs and things. But I didn't like him much."

"Thought he came too often, eh?" he suggested with lazy humour.

She felt the colour rising again. "He was just a common farmer," she protested.

"Oh, was he?" said Dick Dynamo. "And she was partial to him, I gather?"

Rosemary winced. Somehow it seemed to her as if

the half-malicious satire had been levelled at herself. "She was always very—neighbourly to him," she said, and shrank again involuntarily at the sound of his laugh.

"Well, why aren't they married, then?" he said.

The question seemed to pierce her. She got up quickly. Her face was crimson. "You've no right to say that," she said. "Of course she would never marry him! You don't understand—nothing will ever make you believe—that—that, whatever may have happened when she was young—she has really been waiting for you—ever since."

His dark eyes came direct to hers. He did not stir in his seat, nor did the cruel smile leave his face. "And you believe that?" he said. "You?"

She flinched again, but she answered him bravely. "Yes, I do. There are lots of things I don't understand. But I know that is true. I—have seen it."

"Seen what?" he said.

She told him, feeling that she spoke to a mask. "I've seen it—in her eyes. She didn't often speak of you. Only once—or twice—when I asked. But she wore your ring always, night and day, on her right hand. I asked her once—when we were alone—if you were ever coming back. She said—she said—" suddenly Rosemary began to sob, she scarcely knew why, save that the memory of Aunt Bobby and all her loving ways had become too poignant to be borne—"she said, 'If God wills, darling.' And then—she sighed,—as if she hadn't much hope left."

She ceased to speak and with a tremendous effort choked back her emotion. The man in the chair by her side said nothing whatever. He lay back with a perfectly inscrutable expression on his dark scarred face, watching the sparkling horizon, almost as if unaware of her.

After a time, becoming more sure of herself, she began to observe him covertly and saw that his cigarette was out. For a space she sat motionless, and then oddly a sense of trespass came upon her, and she rose.

He spoke immediately, an arresting quality in his voice. "Don't go, Rosemary! I want you."

She sat down again, and he resumed his silence, the quenched cigarette still between his lips.

At last, with a curious abruptness, he spoke. "I can't reconcile what you have told me with what actually happened before you were born. There's a hitch somewhere. Did she think I shouldn't regard that letter she wrote as conclusive?"

"I never heard about a letter," said Rosemary.

He flashed her a keen look. His dark eyes had a strange deep glow in them. "You are so like her," he said. "Yet so unlike. Do you always tell the truth?"

She started at the question, but it was not uttered as an insult, and the next instant she realized it. He waited for her answer as if much hung upon it.

"Yes, I do," she said with simplicity.

He took the cigarette from his mouth and flung it away. "Now I'll tell you something," he said, "something you haven't dreamed of. I've called myself Graves for convenience sake for a good many years. But my real name is Thorgrave—Richard Thorgrave, and I have just come into the Ravencombe title and estates."

"Good gracious!" said Rosemary, startled.

He went on, ignoring her. "It means nothing whatever to me—dust and ashes. I have no relations left, except a cousin—Silas Hickory, the rustic farmer you have

just mentioned—who is next of kin,—my heir in short."

"Silas—Hickory!" gasped Rosemary.

He confirmed the statement grimly. "Yes, Silas Hickory, through a *mésalliance* on his mother's part. I've never met the fellow, but I suppose it's up to me to keep the family pride from being vested in the type of person you describe as 'a common farmer,' and for that reason I shall have to marry and get another heir." His eyes were upon her, holding her with an almost fierce dominance. "No woman who has played me false once—" he spoke between his teeth as though he clipped off the words one by one—"is ever given another opportunity. I shall never see your—Aunt Bobby again. But you—I'm sorry for you. You're only a child. Anyhow, I haven't let you down, haven't betrayed your trust in me, have I? I've been thinking a good deal all this time. You're so like her that I didn't know at first if I could stand it. But I've come to see you lately with different eyes. You don't remind me of her at every turn as you did. You're getting a personality of your own. So now—I'm willing to marry you, if you're willing to be married to me. And I'll look after you and be a good husband to you—as long as you stick to me."

His hand came out to her with the words and held her own. He looked at her with eyes from which all hardness had vanished.

"I'll be kind to you, child," he said. "You needn't be afraid."

"Oh stop!" said Rosemary. She had turned very pale, and she met his look with a kind of desperation. She spoke quickly, her voice sharp with distress. "Don't you see that's one of the reasons why I thought I would go

into a convent? I don't want to be married. And even if I did, I couldn't possibly marry you. It wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be straight. You—you ought to marry Aunt Bobby."

Something in his dark face warned her, and she stopped abruptly. The hand that held hers had tightened until its grasp was acutely painful, but she did not flinch, although in that moment she feared him as she had never feared anyone in her life before. For in his eyes was something unfathomable, something that made her think of a soul in torture. His silence appalled her, yet she dreaded to hear him speak, and when he did so at last her heart was beating so violently that she could scarcely hear the words.

"Why have you said this to me?" It was an absolutely quiet question, wholly free from any menace of wrath, but it might have been dead lips that uttered it. The hand that gripped hers was like cold steel.

She found herself compelled to answer him, compelled to express the naked truth as she saw it. Her voice sounded odd and strained even to herself, but the words came without hesitation or faltering. "Because you love her."

That was all. Just a plain and simple statement of fact! Nothing had ever before sounded so crude, even brutal, to her ears, but she had no choice but to utter it. It was as if, at his behest, she had held up a mirror to his soul to show him the stark reality that dwelt there. He had demanded it of her, but none the less did she expect some crushing retribution for what she had done. In that moment she saw him as a man who had suffered beyond the limit of human endurance, and it seemed as if

human control must fail. But seconds passed and there came no violent outburst; only that deadly quiet—only that fixed and mask-like regard!

It continued until her own control began to waver, and finally she could bear it no longer. She stirred the hand he held, and the next instant to her surprise she found it free. His own hand fell, and he lay back in his chair as if he had forgotten her presence. She could not interpret his attitude, but it seemed almost one of exhaustion. For a brief space she continued to sit by his side irresolute; then, summoning her courage, she got up and slipped away.

He did not so much as turn his head to mark her going.

CHAPTER IX

"I WILL ARISE . . ."

AGAIN, but less poignantly now, that sense of desolation came upon Rosemary as she walked between the orange-trees in the hotel-garden. The anguish of soul that had possessed her that morning was over. That had passed while she had knelt upon the steps of the wayside Cross, and though complete peace was not yet hers, a certain sense of security had reached her there and still remained. She knew, quite inexplicably yet beyond question, that some decision would presently come to her—a right decision upon which she would be given strength to act. The amazing revelation regarding himself that her companion had made had not greatly affected her. In the old days it would have stirred her to the depths, but so much had happened of late, and she had known—somehow she had always known—that he was some species of prince in disguise. The discovery that she herself had made concerning him went deeper, and now she realized that it was not such a great discovery after all. She had been more or less aware of it from the beginning. From the moment of her recognition of him, she had regarded him as belonging to Aunt Bobby, and—she faced it now—it was in part that outlook which had induced her in the first overwhelming revulsion of feeling to give herself into his keeping. It had been an action of mad,

unreasoning impulse made in a moment when all the values of life had changed for her. In her wild desire to escape at all costs she had not stopped to ask herself whither that desperate step might lead. That it had not so far led to complete shipwreck was due to no effort of hers. It was the half-cynical, half-compassionate chivalry of her companion that had been her salvation. Whether through kindness or indifference, he had given her time to realize the headlong rashness of her action, and to repent it if she so desired. It came to her as she walked that he had been astoundingly generous to her. Was it his love for Aunt Bobby that had made him so?

Again her thoughts returned to the beloved being who had been all the world to her, and for the first time she tried to bring them into some sort of order. There was much that she could not know, scarcely even surmise, but it seemed to her, after a brief review of her own fantastic situation, that if by some means Aunt Bobby had in the long ago been betrayed into taking a false step she was possibly not solely to blame. The bare thought of blaming her renewed the old pain, but she faced it with greater courage now and with less bitterness. Allowing for that one terrible fall for which there was no means of accounting, with what bravery and loyalty she had borne her burden since! Did she—Rosemary—owe her nothing for that? The lifelong deception was harder to condone, but it had been conceived for her own sake; that she clearly saw. And what was she, who had just acted with such wholesale disregard of consequences, such utter lack of consideration for others, to stand up in judgment? A strange humility had begun to awake in Rosemary. She saw herself in a new light, and by

that light she now saw the deeds of others. Certainly she was in no position to condemn.

Wandering on in the sunshine, with glimpses here and there of a sea so vividly blue that it seemed as if it could not be real, she came slowly to the deeper understanding that she sought. So far she had only thought of herself. She realized the fact with shame. In her wild dash for freedom, nothing else had mattered. She had suffered cruelly, but by her action she had caused far greater suffering to Aunt Bobby. This she knew beyond question, and her sense of shame increased. Aunt Bobby, the beloved, who had done everything,—sacrificed everything—for her! What agonies had she endured as a consequence of this! Rosemary's hands clenched. It was harder in that moment to think of Aunt Bobby's pain than her own, but she found herself compelled to think. And this, though she knew it not, was the first definite upward step she had ever taken. Self-reproach followed swiftly and overwhelmingly, and presently she was stumbling blindly among the rocks on the shore of that incredibly blue sea, heedless of direction, conscious only of the one lacerating thought that Aunt Bobby—her beloved, her darling—had suffered and was still suffering through her.

Later, feeling physically exhausted and mentally bewildered, she sat on one of those dark rocks and gazed before her in a kind of maze of despair. What was she to do?

Later still—how much later she did not know—words which were somehow familiar to her began to repeat themselves over and over in her brain. It was like an inner voice that would not be denied. "I will arise—I

will arise—and go to my father—and say unto him, 'Father, I have sinned—I have sinned'". . . And then again, more insistently still: "I will arise—I will arise."

Then at last she knew that the message for which she had been subconsciously waiting ever since the morning had come to her, and she must obey. It was the one thing that she had said she could not do—the one thing that made her shrink with a scorching sense of shame; but it had been laid upon her, and she would not turn aside. Whatever the cost, the decision was made and she would not flinch. She got upon her feet and lifted her face to the sky that had begun to turn golden towards the west.

"I will do it," she said, and her voice was clear and steadfast. "I will go back."

The relief of having made that decision was greater than anything she had ever known. She felt as if a light had suddenly shone in the darkness, pointing the way, and though it was uphill and difficult she knew that the strength she needed for the journey would be given. How it was to be accomplished she knew not, but the will to accomplish was hers.

And so she turned her face once more towards the orange garden above the shore to seek her companion and to tell him of the decision she had made. He would probably be angry, but she faced the possibility without a falter. Whatever he did or said, she would not be deterred.

She found that she had wandered much further than she had realized, and already the chill of sunset was in the air. The sea lay like an immense opal, still and silent, under a sky that was changing from blue to purest prim-

rose. The sun was sinking rapidly towards the horizon. The shore looked deeply black.

She quickened her steps. It would be dark before she reached the hotel. She had not been out alone so late before during their travels. She was not nervous, but the thought of Dick Dynamo, as she still called him to herself, agitated her somewhat. She did not want to upset him unnecessarily; for he had shown her more than once that he could be formidable.

The way back seemed endless, the curve of the shore interminable. She wondered what had induced her to come so far. But it was only the beginning of a much longer journey, and she would not suffer herself to be discouraged. She had already begun to return.

The sun dipped lower, finally sank. A cold wind swept up from the west and the whole world turned ashen. The change smote upon Rosemary's heart almost like a curse. She had the sudden scared feeling of a lost child. What if return were made impossible for her? What if she were condemned to wander forever in a world from which all the sunshine had been withdrawn? Then, away in the distance ahead of her, a star began to shine, and she took courage again. Whatever the difficulties ahead of her, she would meet them bravely. She would not be cast down.

The gloom became darkness as she finally drew near to the steps that led up from the shore to the hotel-garden. She broke into a run over the last few yards. It seemed to her that she was leaving an inexpressible dreariness behind. She stumbled as she ran, for the ground was rough and stony. The wind was wailing eerily along the beach.

She reached the steps with relief, began to spring up them; then suddenly stopped midway, standing with caught breath and wildly throbbing heart. There at the gate above her, dimly discernible, stood a figure.

It was not Dick Dynamo; of that she was practically certain. Yet the impression that it was someone who was awaiting her penetrated deeply into her consciousness. But if not Dick Dynamo,—and the vague outline looked too thick-set, altogether too heavily built to be his—if not he, who could it be?

She could not tell, but in those moments a positive panic of doubt went through her and she was near to turning in unreasoning terror and fleeing back along the beach by the way she had come. She thought later that it was only the desolate sighing of the wind and the moaning of the sea that deterred her. But many seconds passed before she nerved herself to continue the ascent to the top of the steps.

She accomplished it at length, slowly, as if her limbs obeyed her with difficulty, mounting step by step until she reached the last. And still the figure above her stood quite motionless, waiting for her.

She accosted it at last because the silence was unbearable, almost uncanny.

"Are you wanting anything?" she said. "Are you waiting for me?"

She spoke in English intuitively. Some inner prompting told her that it could be no Italian standing there, impervious to that icy *mistral*.

And at once a voice replied in English—a calm, deliberate voice that sent all the blood to her heart in a rush.

"Yes, I was waiting for you," it said, "but I've done now. I'm going to take you home."

"Good gracious!" gasped Rosemary, and nearly fell backwards in her astonishment. "It's The Old Bean!"

A big hand came out and grasped her, pulling her safely through the gate. "Yes, it's me," said The Old Bean superfluously and somewhat grimly. "And now we'll go back."

CHAPTER X

THE ESCORT

SHE stood before him speechlessly. His hand had fallen from her arm. The gate swung to with a clang, and they remained facing one another while the wind swept the shore below them and an incongruous scent of roses wafted down from the garden above.

It was so like The Old Bean, she thought later, not to ask her what she was doing in that strange place, merely to announce his intention of taking her back. It dawned on her as she stood there, that he probably meant to carry out that intention with her consent or without it, so uncompromising was his attitude. His face she could not see with any distinctness, and she reflected with some relief that he could not see hers either. He was not an imaginative person, and she hoped that he had not fully realized her discomfiture. She made a determined effort to cover it.

"How clever of you to find me!" she said.

"It was rather," said The Old Bean. "I've had a considerable hunt."

"And you've only just got here?" she said.

"No," said The Old Bean. "I got here yesterday."

That surprised her, though she tried not to be surprised. "Where are you staying?" she asked.

"I'm putting up at this place," he said, with a nod towards the hotel that was now giving forth points of light in the darkness.

"You spent last night here?" she questioned.

"Yes," said The Old Bean.

"But why didn't we meet before?" she asked, puzzled.

"I kept out of your way," he explained.

"Why?" she asked.

"I wanted to find out something," said The Old Bean.

Somehow that pierced her; she felt herself tingle all over. "What did you want to find out?" she demanded.

He did not answer, and she found his silence unbearable.

"I suppose you wanted to know if I'm still respectable or not!" she flung at him, standing fiercely upright as one braced for attack.

"No," said The Old Bean quietly. "I just wanted to know if you were married yet."

She caught her breath; it was like a stab through the heart. "I'm not then!" she declared with a kind of fiery vehemence that seemed to consume herself. "So now you know!"

"Thank you," said The Old Bean courteously. "I am glad to know."

"Why?" she stormed, finding his calm acceptance of the situation intolerable. "Why are you glad? What business is it of yours—or anyone's?"

She was quivering from head to foot as she asked the question. All the agony of shame that she had suffered in anticipation of her return to the old life and the old familiar faces was not equal to this. The intensity of it was such that she almost wanted to scream, though she

did not expect him to understand, even wildly hoped that he could not. It was more endurable that he should deem her basely ungrateful than suspect the fiery torture that he had somehow managed to inflict.

And then, to her utter amazement he broke in upon her tourmoil with a quiet remark that completely altered the trend of her thoughts.

"If you ask me," he said, "I should say it isn't anyone's business but mine. But you may think otherwise. I daresay you will."

He said the last sentence as one making a concession to a recognized weakness which would in the end be overcome. She remembered that in earlier days she had observed a tendency in him to this method of treating difficulties. It had amused her then. It did not amuse her now.

"How can you possibly pretend it is your business?" she said, aware too late that in saying it she exposed a vulnerable point. "You are only a friend after all."

"Yes, exactly that," said The Old Bean, and with the words he drove his lance straight into the weak spot before she could attempt to cover it. "I am a friend. There's no pretense about that anyway. I'm glad you admit it."

"It doesn't mean anything," said Rosemary hastily.

"It does to me," said The Old Bean, with absolute simplicity. "And that's why I've come to take you home."

"Oh!" said Rosemary, and after a moment's rapid thought: "But I was coming in any case. I mean, I'd decided to go back."

He accepted the statement in his usual direct way. Being sincere himself, he seemed to take it for granted that he would meet with sincerity in others. "That's so much

the better," he said, and again she had a feeling that his own decision upon that point had been made before he had acquainted himself with hers. "And the sooner the better, I should say. When can you start?"

That took her by surprise afresh. It did not seem to go quite naturally with the general leisureliness of his attitude. He had waited twenty-four hours before announcing himself, and now he was apparently prepared for instant action. She had never credited The Old Bean with a vast amount of energy, and for some reason she felt inclined to resent this revelation of it.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "I've got to talk to—to Dick first."

"I'll talk to him," said The Old Bean, "while you're getting ready."

"You!" said Rosemary, still further startled though hardly knowing wherefore. "I don't suppose he'd listen to you."

"Oh yes, he would," said The Old Bean. "He'd have to."

She stood and stared at him in the darkness. Then she shivered. "Do you know who he is?" she said.

"Yes, I know," said The Old Bean. "I found that out before I left England. Shall we go in and find him? You're cold."

He made a move as if to walk up the path, but Rosemary stood still. Her two hands were pressed tightly against her breast.

"Suppose he won't listen to you!" she said in a low voice. "Suppose he won't let me go with you!"

"Isn't that rather absurd?" asked The Old Bean in mild surprise.

She shook her head vehemently. "No, it isn't absurd. I can't go without his consent—after all he has done for me."

"I will get his consent," said The Old Bean patiently.

"You!" she said again, a ring of desperation in her voice. "You don't know what you're up against."

"It's you who don't know that," said The Old Bean unexpectedly, and with the words suddenly, amazingly, he took her by the shoulders and held her. "You talk about not being able to get away from that loafer up there," he said. "What about me? Think you can get away from me?"

It was as if a thunderbolt had fallen at her feet. Rosemary gave a gasp and shut her eyes. It was the most astounding thing that had ever happened to her. A short time before she would have said that nothing could ever surprise her again, and now once more the whole world seemed toppling around her. She made a feeble effort to set her hands against the broad chest and hold herself from him—an effort that was instantly and compellingly defeated.

"Don't hurt me, Old Bean!" she begged weakly, as his arms crushed her to him. "Don't hurt me!"

"Hurt you!" he said, and in his voice was a deep quiver that seemed to set her whole body vibrating. "I'll kill you if you ever try to play this game again. But no one else shall ever touch a hair of your precious head. That I swear! Now kiss me!"

But she hid her face low on his breast, in shamed avoidance, hearing the firm beat of his heart, and strangely thankful for the warmth of his sheltering arms. "What must you think of me?" she whispered inarticulately.

His hand was feeling for her face. There was something quite indomitable about The Old Bean that night. He strode over every obstacle. "I'll tell you when you've kissed me," he said.

Again feebly she sought to resist him, but he would not be resisted. He had his way, and lifting her face to his he kissed her over and over again until, strangely, her shame slipped from her. Her arms went round his neck and she kissed him in return. . . .

"Though I don't know why I should!" she whispered a little later. "Old Bean, what made you—do it?"

"What made me?" he said. "You made me, of course. Do you think you're going to belong to any other man but me? Just listen to me, Rosemary! I've tracked you all this way because I want you, and I mean to have you. We'll be married out here as soon as ever I can fix it up, and we'll be married again when we get back to England just to make sure."

"Oh!" said Rosemary, and drew a long breath. "That would satisfy—everybody."

"So long as it satisfies you, that's all that matters," he told her bluntly. "I'm not out to please the rest of the world. They can all jolly well take a back seat, and Ravencombe with 'em. It's you—and only you—that matters."

Rosemary gave a gasp. There was substantial comfort in this; but something within her—something which had developed only during that day of suffering—made her begin to withdraw from his sheltering arms.

"That's all very well, Old Bean," she said. "And I'm very, very grateful to you, because goodness only knows why you should want to marry me. But I know of a very

big reason why you shouldn't. It's the reason that made me run away from Bode, and has kept me away all this time."

"I thought you said you were going back," said The Old Bean, firmly frustrating her effort to release herself.

"I know—I was." Rosemary's voice trembled a little. "But only because I realized I ought to, and—and—because I wanted—I so wanted—Aunt Bobby."

"Well, I shan't keep you away from her," said The Old Bean. "In fact, it'll be easier for you—tons easier—if you go back with me."

"Oh, but that isn't what I mean," said Rosemary. "It's something quite different—something I don't know how to tell you. You've been thinking all this time that I ran away just for an adventure—a lark. But it wasn't, Old Bean; it really wasn't! It was because of something I heard—something about myself." Her voice became choked; she paused to master her distress.

"I say, don't cry!" said The Old Bean, drawing her closer.

"I'm not!" whispered Rosemary resolutely. "But I've got to tell you—now. You'd better let me go, Old Bean, before—before it's too late."

"There's only one thing on earth would make me do that," he said with decision.

"What's that?" she asked faintly.

He answered her with some force. "Being quite sure that you yourself personally wanted it. If you can't tell me that—and I'm pretty sure you can't—you needn't tell me anything else."

That moved her; she clasped the arm that she had sought to slacken. "Old Bean, you are a brick!" she said

shakily. "But I'm going to tell you all the same, because I couldn't let you marry me without knowing. It wouldn't be right. It's just this—just this. I'm not what you think I am—what I always used to think I was myself. I'm—I'm one of those dreadful creatures that are born when they ought not to be. I don't know who my father was. My mother—my mother—" she broke off; it was useless to struggle any longer—"I can't say it!" she sobbed. "You'll have to understand without."

"Oh, poor little darling!" said The Old Bean, and held her passionately close. "Stop crying! Stop crying, I tell you! I don't care a twopenny damn! What on earth does it matter when you know I love you? Who was the brute that told you?"

She clung to him. "Dick—Lord Ravencombe," she whispered. "He knows it must have been so, because he says there never was a brother. And he's very bitter about it, because, you see, he—he loved her."

"Loved who?" questioned The Old Bean, bewildered.

"Her—Aunt Bobby—long ago." Rosemary poured the words rapidly into his ear. The relief of having a confident was indescribable. "She sent him away. He didn't know why. But he loves her still, and he ought to go back to her. I've told him so. Perhaps he will."

"He can go to blazes for all I care," said The Old Bean. "He'd no right to tell you that. He's a skunk."

"Oh no, he isn't!" she protested. "Truly he isn't! He didn't really mean to tell me. It just came out. And then I—I was so shocked—and idiotic—that I begged him to take me away there and then."

"Oh, I see," said The Old Bean, somewhat mollified. "You didn't really care for him then?"

"Oh no, never, really," Rosemary assured him. "I did let him kiss me—just at the first—the night of the Ball. But never since! He's never wanted to since, Old Bean."

"He's got more decency than I gave him credit for," remarked The Old Bean, kissing her himself as one who had the right. "Well, that's all settled then, isn't it? We're going to be married straight away."

"If—if you're sure it doesn't make any difference," said Rosemary tremulously.

"It does make a difference," he asserted. "It makes me all the keener to have you and protect you. No one will dare to say a word against you when you are my wife."

Her arm slipped round his neck again. "What'll you do if they do?" she said.

"Do!" said The Old Bean, blood-thirstily. "I'll murder them!"

She laid her cheek to his with a great sigh. "Oh, it is jolly of you to say that!" she said.

CHAPTER XI

THE VICTOR

THE glare of light from the hotel lounge dazzled Rosemary as she entered. She paused on the mat just within the great swing-door, looking around her. The warmth of the place after the chill without was almost overpowering. It gave her a curious sensation of insecurity, as if the old allurement from which she had so narrowly escaped were weaving its net afresh about her feet. She cast an instinctive glance over her shoulder, caught a glimpse of The Old Bean's towsled red head and was reassured. This solid supporter of hers was made of stouter stuff than dreams. There was no danger of his vanishing into thin air.

He saw the glance and replied to it in an audible undertone. "Carry on! There he is—over in that corner. You lead—I'll follow!" She turned her dazzled eyes in the direction he indicated, and, her vision clearing, she saw the dark, refined face of her travelling-companion bent over a paper. He was evidently not in the least perturbed regarding her absence, and her relief at the discovery was not unmixed with indignation. There seemed to be something almost studied in his complete indifference. It was more in response to The Old Bean's request than her own impulse that she made her way towards him.

There were but few people present as the tea-hour was over. Dick Dynamo had pushed his own tray on one side and was smoking a cigarette as he read. He looked up, however, before she reached him, and she saw in a moment by the mocking light in his eyes that her entrance had not been unobserved by him.

She felt herself turn scarlet as she stood before him. It was with immense effort that she spoke.

"I'm sorry I'm late. I—met a friend."

"Pray don't apologize!" said Dick Dynamo. "I concluded that there was some good reason for your absence." His eyes went beyond her and spent perhaps two seconds in summing up The Old Bean. Then he said: "Have you had any tea?"

The question did not convey that the matter was one of the faintest interest to him, but it had to be answered. Rosemary began to reply in the negative, but The Old Bean gently assumed the responsibility himself.

"No, we haven't. But we're just going to. You've had yours, I see, so it's no good asking you to join us."

Dick Dynamo's eyes kindled a little in response to this, but his voice remained quite suave as he said, "Thanks, no. But it will give me great pleasure to look on. I didn't quite catch your name, I'm afraid."

"It wasn't mentioned," said The Old Bean. "My name is Ross—Donald Ross. Sit down, Rosemary, while I get hold of a waiter!"

"Don't trouble!" said Dick Dynamo, and struck a bell on his own table. "My name is Graves—Richard Graves, at the present moment, as possibly Rosemary may have mentioned. Did she explain that we are travelling together?"

"I didn't need to be told that," said The Old Bean stolidly. "I've been following you for the past three weeks."

Dick Dynamo's black brows went up. "Indeed!" he said. "It has taken you some time to come up with us."

"Yes, I know," said The Old Bean. "It's been rather like following a streak of lightning." He drew forward a chair for Rosemary with the words, and pressed her quietly into it.

Dick Dynamo's laugh had a ring of derision. "I followed my mood," he said. "I had an idea that there was someone behind us. That is really why I pulled up."

The Old Bean seated himself close to Rosemary. His freckled face looked more square than usual. His green eyes were unfailingly direct. There was nothing in the least subtle about him, but he looked a solid mass of determination.

Rosemary sat forward in her chair with her head bent. She was evidently feeling her position acutely. She made no attempt to intervene in any way. The flush of embarrassment had passed, leaving her very pale.

Dick Dynamo glanced towards her. "You have been a long way," he remarked.

She shook her head, not lifting her eyes. "No, not very far, only along the shore."

"Perhaps a little further than you anticipated," he suggested.

She made a quick gesture of negation. The Old Bean leaned forward, almost with a screening movement.

He was on the verge of speaking when she looked up sharply. "Tell him we're engaged!" she said.

The Old Bean turned ponderously to the other man. "We're engaged," he said.

Dick Dynamo's smile was instant; it had something of an acrobatic quality. "Oh, not without my consent, I think," he said.

"Your consent?" repeated The Old Bean. "Has that —excuse me—anything to do with it?"

"I should say—everything—morally," said Dick Dynamo. "But that by the way! Won't you have your tea first?"

"I don't know," said The Old Bean. "I think I'd sooner talk first if it's all the same to you. Rosemary may be your guest, but I don't see that that involves any moral obligation to ask your consent to our getting married. I've always meant to marry her for as long as I've known her, and I've known her for considerably longer than you have."

"It looks as if her intentions and yours have not always been identical," observed Dick Dynamo, flicking the ash from his cigarette. "It's the first I've heard of them anyway."

His eyes were upon Rosemary as he spoke with the old appraising look that she had come to know so well. She met them with a kind of desperation. "You're only joking," she said, in a low voice. "It doesn't really matter two pins to you what I do."

His smile at once included her in its mockery. "I hope I take a more serious view of my responsibilities than that," he said.

"Your responsibilities!" said The Old Bean, a sudden throb in his voice that seemed to indicate that there was more beneath his composure than he had so far permitted to appear. "That's a point I should rather like to discuss with you."

Dick Dynamo's attention was at once transferred to him. "You shall, my good fellow," he said kindly, "but I recommend that the discussion should be held in a more private place than this. And meantime, here is your tea, so don't let me interrupt you!"

He leaned back in his chair again and resumed the study of his paper, leaving his two companions completely to their own devices. The result of this proceeding was that they sat as culprits in a guilty silence while the waiter clattered the tea-cups in front of Rosemary and finally withdrew.

The Old Bean was the first to move. Laboriously and with furrowed brow, he dragged his chair round until his back was completely turned upon Dick Dynamo; then with a steady hand he drew the tray to him and began to pour out the tea.

Rosemary started, as one coming out of a dream. "Shan't I do that?" she said.

"No, darling," said The Old Bean quietly and with great distinctness. "I'll see to everything. You're tired."

The opportunity to serve her seemed to restore his confidence. He ate and drank and saw that she did the same without the smallest sign that he was aware of the man who sat reading the paper behind him. And Rosemary also, re-acting to his influence, gradually recovered her equilibrium, so that at the end of the meal they were talking together in low tones almost as if they had been alone.

"You had better go and get a rest," said The Old Bean when she had finished, and nodded reassuringly when she looked up with quick interrogation in her eyes.

She rose without demur, and he rose also and walked with her across the nearly deserted lounge to the stairs.

"Don't get wind up!" he said when they were out of ear-shot. "I've got you all right and I'm going to keep you. Mephistopheles himself couldn't alter that."

She smiled though somewhat wanly. "Don't have a row with him, Old Bean!" she said.

"Good gracious, no!" said The Old Bean with a smile.

He watched her up the stairs, then turned with square intention and walked back to the corner he had just left. Dick Dynamo was still deep in his paper. He pulled a chair to his side and sat down.

"I want to talk to you," he said.

The elder man looked up, and over his dark thin features there passed an odd expression, as if for a moment he saw something more than the honest, freckled countenance before him.

"Talk away!" he said.

The Old Bean proceeded without further preamble. "You don't altogether understand the situation," he said. "Perhaps I don't either. But I know all I need to know. I've followed Rosemary out here to take her home."

"Oh, indeed!" said Dick Dynamo. He glanced around him with the words, and seeing one or two people still lingering in the vicinity, he got up. "Perhaps we shall dispose of this matter more quickly in private," he said.

"Wherever you like," said The Old Bean.

Dick Dynamo led the way to the lift and they ascended together. On the top floor he took the lead again, and they finally entered a room that looked out over the bay now all spangled with lights.

The Old Bean shut the door behind him and moved forward. There was another door in the room at which he glanced.

Dick Dynamo smiled a little, showing his teeth. "There is a curtain on the other side," he said. "You won't be overheard unless you raise your voice."

"Rosemary's room?" asked The Old Bean bluntly.

"Exactly. Rosemary's room." Very blandly came the reply. "I am taking good care of her, you see."

The Old Bean heard the gibe in the words and flushed a little, but he kept himself in hand. "I'm glad you've been decent to her," he said. "I don't see how anyone could be anything else myself. She's such a kid. I haven't yet fathomed why you brought her here."

"It was by her own wish," said Dick Dynamo.

"Yes, she told me that." The Old Bean paused a moment; then: "She's told me everything," he said, "that is, everything she knows."

"Then I hope you are satisfied," said Dick Dynamo.

"I am on some points," said The Old Bean. "Not on all. Why don't you want me to marry her?"

The question was characteristically direct, but it held no challenge. He spoke merely as one seeking information. Dick Dynamo, leaning against the bed-rail, regarded him wholly without animosity. He even after a moment took out his cigarette-case and offered it to him.

"No, thanks," said The Old Bean. "I prefer a pipe later. Do you mind answering me?"

"You're rather young, aren't you?" said Dick Dynamo, helping himself.

"I am twenty-two," said The Old Bean.

The other nodded. "So I should have said. I shouldn't do it if I were you."

The Old Bean showed no sign of exasperation. "Different things suit different people," he said. "But I doubt

if I should come to you for advice in any case. The whole point is that I am going to marry Rosemary at the earliest possible moment. You may try to prevent it, though I don't see why you should. But you won't succeed, so it's a pity to waste your time."

"Quite sure of that?" said Dick Dynamo, blowing his cigarette-smoke thoughtfully upwards.

"I am quite sure," said The Old Bean.

"You're wrong then," said Dick Dynamo. "I can stop you with the greatest ease. I think you forget that. Rosemary is a minor."

"That can be got over," said The Old Bean.

"Not without my consent," said Dick Dynamo.

"Your consent!" Again The Old Bean repeated the words as if he were not quite sure that he heard aright. "But what has it to do with you? You don't want to marry her yourself, I suppose?"

Dick Dynamo's eyes came to his with a gleam that was like the flash of steel. "Why should you suppose that, I wonder?" he said in a voice that was very level.

The Old Bean replied with his customary simplicity. "You're not in love with her for one thing and she wouldn't have you for another."

"Has she told you so?" asked Dick Dynamo.

"No, she didn't need to. You see, she's accepted me." With complete assurance The Old Bean made reply. He was playing his strong suit now and he had no fear of being routed. "You may of course manage to postpone our marriage but you won't prevent it in the end—just because of that. I shall take her straight back to her people. I have told her so, and it is her own wish. I am not afraid of their refusing their permission."

"I see," said Dick Dynamo. His eyes went back to his cigarette-smoke, and he was silent for a space. At length: "Then I—having brought her thus far under my more or less capable guardianship—am to have no further say in the matter?" he said.

"I don't know why you should want any," said The Old Bean.

"You know very little," said Dick Dynamo. "But I will tell you this. Having put my mind to the plough, I don't as a rule look back. Rosemary will not marry you—or any other man—until she has gone back to her people and got their consent. That's final."

"Then in heaven's name let's take her back!" said The Old Bean.

"Us!" Dick Dynamo's look returned to him, but it was brief and scathing. "Strange to say, I am not proposing to include you in my party," he said.

"No," said The Old Bean quietly. "But you can't prevent me coming too."

"I don't advise you to do that." The words came with a clean-cut brevity, like the drawing of a rapier. Dick Dynamo no longer leaned against the bed-rail. He was on his feet, poised as it were for action like a practised fencer.

But The Old Bean with his hands in his pockets remained completely quiescent. "I'm sorry," he said. "But I'm not taking your advice. Wherever Rosemary goes—I go."

"You think I shall allow that?" said Dick Dynamo.

"I think you can't prevent it," said The Old Bean.

Dick Dynamo smiled again and the scar down the side of his face became a deep furrow reaching to the temple.

"I believe I can convince you on that point anyhow," he said, and suddenly his right hand went into his pocket.

It was a lightning movement, and one which The Old Bean could scarcely have frustrated had he been forewarned. He found himself looking straight at the shining muzzle of a small automatic held with absolute steadiness within a yard of his face.

Taken wholly by surprise, he could not check an instinctive gesture of recoil, but it was only momentary. The next instant he was his own master. "Hullo!" he said. "What's that for?" and dug his hands still deeper into his pockets.

Dick Dynamo answered him in an undertone. He spoke between his teeth, and his thin lips scarcely moved with the words; they remained set in that terrible smile that seemed to stretch up to his temple.

"It's for you if you get in my way," he said.

The Old Bean's green eyes fixed him unwaveringly. "I suppose they allow that sort of thing in this country," he said. "But I haven't given you much reason for shooting me at present."

"That depends on how you look at it," said Dick Dynamo. "I don't mean to be hampered by you, that's all. So the sooner you quit, the better."

But The Old Bean remained stationary. "If you think," he said, "that I'm like one of those Dago chaps in Mexico to be frightened away by the sight of a gun, you're damn' well mistaken. I haven't spent three weeks hunting for Rosemary to be put off by that kind of thing now I've found her. So—as I've no intention of quitting, you may as well shoot at once."

He spoke, as he had spoken throughout, with complete

moderation. There was in The Old Bean, wary Scot though he might be, a strain of that high daring that had borne his ancestors through many a wild foray. But as he faced Dick Dynamo, there was nothing about him to suggest that he was literally gambling with his life as the stake. If the man before him were sane, the odds were in his favour. But there was something—a species of devilish derision—in the eyes that met his that made him very doubtful on that point. He realized in that most critical moment that Dick Dynamo was capable of madness.

And then very abruptly the tension ended, and he knew that he had won. The murderous little weapon was plunged back into the pocket from which it had been taken, and a sinewy hand came forth and grasped his shoulder.

"You young fool!" said Dick Dynamo. "You love her so much that you'd die for her, eh?"

"Not for choice," said The Old Bean, still almost phlegmatic in his self-control. "I didn't expect you to murder me, and I'd sooner live for her. You see, as I think I've mentioned before, I'm going to marry her."

Dick Dynamo broke into a half-grudging laugh. "Well, you can have her," he said. "She turned me down only this afternoon. Did she tell you that?"

"No," said The Old Bean with simplicity. "She wouldn't, you know. All she said was—after accepting me—that she couldn't marry me without your consent, because you had been good to her."

"Ah!" said Dick Dynamo. "I told you you couldn't have her without it, didn't I? You won't get her to run away with you. I promise you that."

"I'm not the sort that runs away," protested The Old Bean. "I can't see any necessity. If you think there will be any difficulty about our getting married without her aunt's consent, I'll wire to her at once."

"You're a persevering lad, aren't you?" said Dick Dynamo.

"I know what I want, if that's what you mean," said The Old Bean.

"And see that you get it, eh?" Something besides derision sounded in the words. "Well, it's your own show. But if she lets you down, don't blame me!"

The Old Bean looked at him and for the first time addressed him with respect. "I shouldn't blame anyone except myself, sir, if that happened," he said. "It'll be up to me to see it doesn't."

Dick Dynamo's hand loosed its grasp and struck him a friendly blow. "By gad, I hope you'll succeed!" he said. "You deserve to. There's more in you than meets the eye."

"Oh, I don't think so," said The Old Bean modestly. "At least it's the first I've heard of it."

Dick Dynamo laughed—a laugh that entirely transformed him. "Well, you've upset my apple-cart completely," he said. "I had just made up my mind to take her back again to her people when you turned up. And now, since you are here, perhaps you had better get married first."

"I certainly think the sooner the better," said The Old Bean. "It'll make things easier for her."

"I suppose you've got enough to live on?" said Dick Dynamo.

"Oh, more than enough," The Old Bean assured him.

"I'm quite certain her people will approve from that point of view."

"All right," said Dick Dynamo. "I'll answer for the rest. Do you know what made me point that gun at you just now?"

"You probably felt like it," said The Old Bean politely.

"No. I just wanted to know what you would do with your hands." Dick Dynamo regarded him with unmasked approval. "There's a lot in that," he said. "And you did exactly what I wanted you to do. You kept 'em down. I congratulate you.—It wasn't loaded, by the way."

"Of course I guessed that," said The Old Bean, turning a dark red.

Dick Dynamo's eyes retained their approval. He held out his hand. "My boy, you're a bad liar," he said. "Will you shake?"

The Old Bean's hand came out of his pocket at last to grip the one which a few seconds before had threatened him. He said nothing, but the grip was obviously satisfactory.

"Yes," said Dick Dynamo, with his swift electric smile. "I'd go down to hell with a fellow like you, and the odds are we'd come back again. If I'd had you with me fifteen years ago—" he caught back a sudden sigh and laughed again. "What am I talking about? You weren't born then!"

"I was seven," said The Old Bean practically. "But I'd be proud to go to hell with you any day you like to mention."

"Ah!" said Dick Dynamo between a sigh and a smile.

"Married men can't do things like that! And I'm getting past the age myself."

"You'll have to get married too," said The Old Bean.

There was an instant's silence. Then: "Let's go down and get a drink!" said Dick Dynamo.

PART IV

CHAPTER I

PETER AND MARY

"IT'LL never be the same thing again," said Mary mournfully.

"Who wants it to be?" said Peter.

He sat in the glow of the fire cleaning his gun while the pale winter twilight entered frostily through the leaded window behind him. Mary was too thrifty to light her lamp before it had faded.

She smiled, though somewhat wistfully at his question. "I'm afraid I don't like change," she said.

"I don't mind if it's for the better," said Peter.

"Ah! That's just it," said Mary, her head bent over her knitting.

He threw a humorous glance towards her. "Cheer up, my girl!" he said. "Don't get old before your time!"

She managed to send back a smile. "It's not that, Peter. I'm no older than I am, and no younger either. Goodness knows I don't want to sadden anybody, but I've had a feeling all this winter as if there's change coming. Lots of things are going to be different all round us, and only you and I will be left the same."

"Well, so long as we are the same!" said Peter. "I don't see that anything else matters much myself."

"You're a man," said Mary with a sigh.

"Well, I can't help that," said Peter with a grin.

She smiled again to humour him, though the effort was a poor one. "You always used to say that you didn't think Miss Bobby would have Silas," she said. "And now!"

"She hasn't got him yet, has she?" said Peter.

"They're not married, if that's what you mean," said Mary.

"Wasn't it what you meant?" asked Peter with a twinkle.

Mary's smile faded. "I don't know," she said. "I love her—just as everyone does. But I don't quite understand her. There's something at the back of it all, Peter. There's a closed door somewhere. It isn't for me to ask questions, but I don't feel happy about it all. I'm dreadfully anxious on Silas's account."

"Oh, leave Silas alone! He can look after himself," said Peter comfortably. "I've never known Silas go under yet."

"I'm sure I hope you never will," said Mary. "But I don't feel easy about him. He takes things hard, does Silas. He follows her almost like a dog. Of course I'm very glad—like everyone else—that Rosemary is safe and sound and none the worse for her wild pranks. But I don't quite like their going off to London together like this. It doesn't seem natural."

"She wasn't fit to go alone," pointed out Peter. "You wouldn't have liked me to have gone, would you?"

"Miss Matilda was the one who ought to have gone with her to see Rosemary married," said Mary, ignoring this attempt at levity. "If only she weren't such a poor thing——"

"I'm not so darned sure that she is such a poor thing," observed Peter, turning more towards the window to obtain the full benefit of the fading light. "She's more or less what I call a fictitious invalid is Miss Matilda. She could get up all right and do things if she'd a mind."

"Oh, I don't know." Mary rose dutifully to light the lamp. "She's very bronchial. Dr. Bellamy's car is always going up to the Vicarage now."

"Jolly decent of 'em to keep her there!" declared Peter. "I'm pretty thankful she doesn't quarter herself on us, Polly. Miss Bobby's one thing, but Miss Matilda,—well, she's quite another."

"I know," said Mary. "I'm not grudging anybody anything, and I'm always glad to do what I can. But I wish things would get straight again. I don't like all this coming and going, and telegrams—well, telegrams always do make me feel bad."

"That last one was a godsend anyhow," remarked Peter. "It was new life to Miss Bobby. I'll never forget how her poor face lighted up when she read it. It's wonderful the store she sets by Rosemary. On my word, the losing of her was nearly her death-blow."

"Yes—yes," agreed Mary, the glow from the newly-lighted lamp spreading over her honest comely face. "It's dreadful to think how much lies in the hands of the young, and how little they realize it. Do you suppose that Rosemary and that young Mr. Ross have been going about together all this time?"

Peter considered the matter judicially. "Well, it's hard to say," he decided at length. "But I don't think it's altogether likely because if he's as straight as he looks he'd have got married to her before. No, it's my opinion that

she's got herself into some scrape—as I always thought she would—and he, being fond of her, has just come to the rescue."

"Oh, Peter!" said Mary, shocked. "I wouldn't like to think that."

"Well, you never know," said Peter. "There were some funny stories going round Bode after that Boxing Night Ball. First it was that young Hudson, and then it was a much more important personage who was given the credit for spiriting her away. But, whoever it was, the fact remains that she went—and she didn't go alone."

"No," Mary allowed somewhat reluctantly. "That's true. But it was just a prank. I'm sure it couldn't have been anything more. It may have been young Mr. Ross all the time after all. The other was so unlikely. It sounded like a myth to me."

"Truth is sometimes stranger than fiction," observed Peter sententiously. "He was staying at *The King's Head* that night, remember, and he disappeared during the night. Miss Rosemary did the same. Roper can testify to that. Why, he was telling me all about it only last market-day. And she had his room to dress in, moreover. I thought that was a very fishy circumstance."

Mary turned her attention to boiling the kettle for tea. "You men always try to believe the worst," she remarked good humouredly. "Talk about women's gossip—why, they can't hold a candle to the men."

"No, but facts are facts," maintained Peter. "And human nature's human nature. She always was a wild one, as you know, and small wonder, considering."

"Considering what?" said Mary.

"You know," said Peter.

She turned from the fire and faced him. "Yes, I do know, Peter. And I'll tell you now, straight out, I don't believe it. I've nursed her and watched over her night and day, and if she isn't as pure as an angel, then I don't know what virtue means!"

Her voice shook a little with the intensity of her declaration. Her homely features were alight with a generous glow. It was not often that Mary stood up to anyone, but when she did, she did the thing nobly. Peter, with his gun between his knees, quite forgot his job in watching her.

"I'm not saying anything about Rosemary," Mary proceeded. "She's young, and she might get led astray in these free times. Anybody might. But Miss Bobby—Miss Bobby's different. She's a saint and always has been. There may be things we don't know. There are. But nothing will shake my belief in her. She's as white as the driven snow."

"By Jove!" said Peter. He said it more to himself than to Mary whose simple eloquence served somehow to place her on a higher level. He sat looking up at her if she had stepped into a niche very far above him. "It's nice of you to think like that," he added after a moment.

"It isn't what I think," said Mary. "It's what I believe and know. Silas knows it too. That's why he worships her so. But, ah dear," she turned back to her kettle with a sigh, "I sometimes doubt if he wins her after all. Somehow I don't think she's to be won."

"What do you think?" asked Peter cautiously.

"I don't know." Mary bent a little, looking into the fire, as though seeking inspiration there. "There's change coming, as I said before. Things'll never settle down

again as they have been. Miss Bobby—she'll never go back to live at Little Staple without Rosemary. Her being married is going to make a lot of difference all round."

"She'll have Silas all right," declared Peter. "It's the only possible thing."

Mary shook her head. "I don't know. I think he'll break his heart if she doesn't. But—I don't know."

"And you'll break yours if she does, eh?" said Peter.

"Me!" said Mary. She did not turn from the fire this time, but as she stood there, her face half-averted, he saw a deep flood of colour spread from neck to brow. She remained bent and silent for several seconds, then slowly she straightened herself and spoke again. "I may be a fool, Peter Garnet," she said, "but I am not quite such a big fool as that, thank God!"

The simple dignity with which she spoke had a strange effect upon Peter. He shuffled his feet as if embarrassed, finally blurting out with schoolboy abruptness, "I wasn't calling you a fool. I think you're the finest woman I've ever seen, bar none. It's Silas that's the fool not to see where his true happiness lies."

Mary gave an odd choked laugh and lifted the kettle off the fire. "Silas is no fool either," she said. "It's what I've always said. He's different from you and me—born different. It's natural that he should turn to a lady born—like Miss Bobby—for his happiness, and I pray every night that she may be moved to give it him. It may be that their going off together like this to see little Rosemary married is a sign that she will. P'raps even, they'll get married themselves before they come back. If so—I tell you, Peter,—I'll be very, very pleased."

She spoke with an emphasis that permitted no questioning, and Peter attempted none. He merely got up and propped his gun in a corner, then stooped to fondle Nero who had risen punctiliously at his movement.

"Don't go out again!" said Mary. "I'll have tea ready in five minutes."

"All right," said Peter. He stood up and looked out of the window to the primrose sky of evening where hung a new moon like a silver horn and a single gem-like star.

Mary busied herself with the tea-things, and for a minute or two the silence between them remained unbroken and unobtrusive. Then, quite suddenly and for no apparent reason, it dawned upon her that there was something unusual about Peter. She paused in her work and looked at him.

There was nothing remarkable about his attitude. His square shoulders and rather thick neck and bullet-head conveyed nothing abnormal to her mind. She had seen him stand so, waiting for a meal, many times in her life, and had never sensed anything in him but that practical patience and goodnature upon which she had always relied. But now—somehow there was something different, something that strangely stirred her, making her feel uncertain, almost afraid.

She stood quite motionless while that curious influence to which she could give no name pulsed and tingled all around her, like an electric current. At last, abruptly, feeling almost as if she could bear no more, she spoke.

"Peter! What are you looking at?"

Her voice had a startled note wholly different from her usual cheery tones. Peter made a slight movement as if taken by surprise, but he did not turn.

"I was just looking at the moon," he said half-sheepishly.

"What ever for?" said Mary.

Her voice still had a staccato sound though she made a definite effort to calm it. She stood by the kitchen-table and her hand gripped the edge of it, for, quite unaccountably, she was trembling.

Peter's answer came with more assurance. It even had a stubborn note; but still he did not turn. "I was wishing for something," he said.

"It's no good wishing through glass," said Mary.

"Oh, isn't it?" said Peter. He made a sudden dive forward, fumbled a moment at the bolt of the window, then threw it wide. "Just you come here!" he said.

She went, strangely torn with emotion. He stretched out a hand to her, not looking towards her, and, as she came within reach, drew her quietly to him. "Look here, Polly!" he said. "Kneel on the window-seat a minute with me! That's right! Now look, old girl! Look at that moon—and wish!"

"What am I to wish for?" said Mary under her breath.

His arm slipped round her as she knelt. His voice also came hushed. "Wish that you may get to love the chap that loves you well enough to marry him!" he said.

"Good gracious, Peter!" said Mary.

His arm closed firmly. "You might do worse," he said.

The frosty air blew in upon them, and Mary became aware of a certain magic quality in it which seemed to be depriving her of her cherished commonsense. She made one despairing effort to retain it.

"Peter, what'll the neighbours say? We've always been like brother and sister, you and I."

"I don't care a damn for that," said Peter, "or the neighbours either. I care for you, and that's about all."

"Good gracious!" said Mary again, with weakening resolution.

"You see," said Peter, "the chances are it won't be you and I and Silas much longer. It'll just be you and I. The neighbours'll jaw worse than ever then—unless we get married."

"Good gracious!" said Mary for the third time, half in awe and half in admiration. "I'd never thought of that!"

"Well, I have," said Peter. "I take it you don't want to lose me as well as Silas, do you?"

"Oh, God forbid!" cried poor Mary, and laid her head down on his shoulder.

"Well, that's all right then," said Peter, "because it's the same with me. So now you can give me a kiss and stop worrying."

She lifted her face obediently. Peter's kisses were offered too rarely to suffer postponement. But when the kiss was over, misgiving again arose within her.

"You're sure we're doing right to think about it, Peter?" she said wistfully. "Sure it isn't for my sake? I'm older than you are, you know, Peter. You're in your prime and I'm getting past mine now."

"Oh, stop talking like a durned fool!" said Peter, and kissed her again roughly and possessively. "Can't you give me credit for knowing my own mind? Who's going to look after me like you do, I'd like to know? Think one of the village-girls with their dances and their whist-

drives 'd do the job well enough to please me? Because I don't, and I'm not wanting any of 'em to try! You old fool, Polly!" He took her by her plump shoulders and gently shook her. "Don't you know a woman like you is God's best gift to a man? Don't you know I'd go sheer crazy without you?"

"Oh, Peter!" said Mary with her eyes full of tears. "Just to think of you feeling like that!"

"I do then!" he said, gripping her almost defiantly. "I've felt like it a long time, but I haven't told you so. It wouldn't have been fair to Silas. But I never meant anyone else to have you, that I promise you. So now, whatever happens, you belong to me."

"Oh, my dear—my dear!" said Mary brokenly.

She would have said much more, but at that moment the kettle boiled over, and commonsense instantly reasserted itself. Peter found himself left alone at the window which he shut and fastened, pulling down the blind and drawing the curtains, while Mary with some lingering agitation attended to the source of their interruption. When he came and joined her by the fire, she had regained much of her customary composure and addressed him with resolution, albeit with still heightened colour.

"We'll say no more of this, Peter, till Silas comes back. I've no wish to seem ungrateful, but—after all these years—I think it would be more becoming."

"All right," said Peter. "But not Silas or anyone else is going to make any difference now. Just you mind that!"

Mary turned round to the table to set down the teapot and in her honest eyes there shone a light which neither Peter nor Silas had ever seen there.

"Oh, don't you be afraid, my dear!" she said softly. "I'm yours—just as I always have been. And if you're satisfied with me as I am now,—well, I shall never be any different, except, maybe, in loving you more as the years go by."

"You'll marry me then?" said Peter, with masculine determination to obtain a definite understanding.

Mary laughed at him—a soft, happy laugh. "Do you want it in writing, Peter?" she said.

"Your word is enough," he said. "Just say, I will!"

"All right! I will," said Mary simply and sincerely. "And now sit down and have your tea!"

CHAPTER II

THE MEETING

THE message that had reached Bobby that morning was one which she had little expected to receive. She had been making strenuous efforts to regain her strength to start upon her quest, though in what direction she meant to go was still a matter of hopeless indecision, when suddenly like the flash of a torch on a dark night, news had come.

She carried it with her now though she did not need it, for she had the words by heart and repeated them over and over inwardly to the drumming of the express in which she sat. They had lost no time, she and Silas, for it had been an understood thing that he should accompany her. She had left everything to him save the packing of her simple luggage which had been Mary's willing service. And already they were on their way.

To Bobby after her long bereavement it had been as a message from the dead. And yet its very simplicity had seemed to breathe of the warmth and vitality that had been the sheer essence of her Rosemary.

"I am here with Donald Ross," so had the message run. "We want to get married at once. Please will you come and give me away? Your loving Rosemary."

The address was a London hotel of which Bobby had no knowledge, but her misgivings were at rest. She knew

and trusted Donald Ross. The stability of The Old Bean was as it were his hall-mark. The relief of realizing that his search had been rewarded with success was almost more than she could bear. She could hardly believe that the long suspense and separation were so nearly over.

"All must be well with her! Surely all must be well!" she had said to Silas.

And he had responded somewhat briefly, "We shall soon know anyhow."

He had made immediate arrangements for the journey, and she knew that he had been prepared for the contingency for some time. Everything that could be done for her comfort was done with a swift, unquestioning efficiency which moved her deeply though it was no time for words. His devotion had always been of a practical turn, and it had become an understood thing between them that she should accept it without scruple. Later she would make such return as lay in her power. This also was understood, and they discussed it no further. It seemed as if they had already become partners.

He watched over her throughout the journey with an attention that was always ready though never obtrusive. Now and then they talked a little, but it was mainly of unimportant things. For the most part they were silent. And the message kept on echoing and re-echoing in Bobby's heart. The child she had loved so tenderly, for whom she had sacrificed so much, was still wanting her, had appealed to her out of the void, calling herself her loving Rosemary. Very soon now—oh, very soon—she would have her darling in her arms again.

The daylight faded and darkness came and with it the moon—that pale new moon which had drawn Mary and

Peter for a brief space out of their work-a-day world. The hopes and fears in Bobby's heart had turned to earnest prayer. As time passed and they sped on she forgot her companion, forgot her own physical weariness, forgot everything in life save that deep supplication of the spirit. How often she had prayed for Rosemary! And how hard of late it had been to feel that her prayers were heard! But to-night a sense of peace came upon her. To-night she knew that she did not pray in vain.

Silas roused her presently with some food that he made her take, and he told her that they were within an hour of their journey's end. That brought her thoughts back to him again. She smiled and thanked him, repudiating the fatigue which nevertheless she could not wholly hide.

"I wonder if they will meet us," she said.

"Somebody is sure to," said Silas.

The thought of that meeting shook Bobby to the depths. She felt as if it were years, instead of a few dreary weeks, that separated her from her Rosemary. She even began to wonder if she would find her greatly changed. Somehow she had a conviction that she also had been through a good deal during those long weeks. But, whatever her experiences had been, she was giving herself into the keeping of a trusty friend at last. Bobby had no misgivings regarding The Old Bean. She did not know him intimately, but she had always liked him, had always instinctively felt that she could trust him. She had said as much to Matilda with whom she had had a brief interview that morning at the Vicarage on her way to the station. But Matilda, who was in bed and being waited on by the patient Mrs. Hudson, had turned her face to the wall and begged her to go away, as she had no desire ever

to see or hear anything more of Rosemary and her doings. Perhaps when Bobby had spent all her savings on getting her married she would kindly come back and look after her, instead of leaving her to be a burden to strangers. She had not even glanced at Bobby or noticed the ravages which those past weeks had wrought upon her. Bobby was the bond-slave born to service, and she had no right to be ill.

Bobby had gone swiftly away from her sister's bedside, and she had not suffered her mind to return thither. Matilda could come afterwards, but Rosemary now was second to none.

The inner tumult increased within her as they neared their destination, though she fought with all her strength for composure. Gazing through the dark window, she hoped and believed that her agitation was not apparent to Silas who had betaken himself to the further corner of the compartment which he had succeeded in keeping clear of intruders throughout the journey.

She tried to think of him for a space, of all that he had done for her; but her thoughts kept flying back to Rosemary, and she was forced to let them go. Silas also must come afterwards.

They reached the suburbs of the Metropolis at last, and she knew that only a few more minutes remained. Her heart was throbbing very hard and she struggled against a feeling of suffocation that threatened over and over again to overwhelm her. On and on between endless rows of houses dimly seen they rushed, till it seemed to Bobby that her nightmare of suspense would never end. On and on, and now they were slackening speed and the end was near.

She felt powerless, as one in the grip of fate; yet as Silas rose and began to collect her belongings she managed to whisper, "Shall I stand by the window—in case—just in case—she is there?"

He saw her agitation and bent down to her. "Steady now! Steady!" he said. "You mustn't let yourself go. Let me give you a hand!"

He helped her to her feet and let down the window. He was close behind her, ready to support her, as she leaned forth.

They glided into the great station with its flaring lamps and waiting porters. Bobby's heart was in her throat. She clutched the woodwork desperately. Surely Rosemary would be there to greet her! Surely she would be there!

But they ran past light after light and she saw no girlish figure searching the train for arrivals. There were very few people at all besides the row of porters. One tall man, clad in an overcoat that did not wholly conceal evening clothes, caught her attention though she did not know why. He was not in the least like The Old Bean. But he had evidently come to meet someone, for he was scanning the carriage-windows as they passed him.

And now, just as the train slid to a standstill, the one at which she stood came within his range of vision, and she saw him move with a slight start. The light was full upon her, but his face was in shadow. He pushed aside a porter and reached the door. With his hand upon it, he swept off his hat and greeted her.

"Ah, Roberta!" he said.

She saw him as in a dream—as in many dreams she had seen him; and as in those dreams her heart ceased to beat

with the wonder of the meeting. It was as though she saw him rise from the grave.

"Dick!" she said.

There arose a great rushing in her ears, a tumult as of engulfing waters all around her. She felt herself sink downwards towards a darkness unfathomable, and was aware of an arm that gripped her and raised her up. Then she was lying back on the cushioned seat, nerveless and gasping, while Silas—strong and able friend—pulled off her gloves and chafed her icy hands.

"Wait! I've got some brandy here," she heard him say, and while she was vaguely marvelling at the forethought that had made him bring it, he was holding a flask to her lips and making her drink.

It brought her to life again with a painful jerk. She fastened trembling hands on his arm.

"Please, Silas, please!" she said.

"Go on!" he said relentlessly. "You want it. I wish I'd made you have it sooner."

It was useless to attempt to resist him. Silas in moments of emergency was apt to loom gigantic and there was nothing for it but submission. She obeyed him therefore, and gradually her strength returned.

She tried to sit up. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she said.

"Stay as you are!" said Silas. "There's no hurry and nothing to be sorry about."

The noises of the great station came back into her consciousness—and with them the memory of her vision. She made a more determined effort to recover her self-control.

"I'm quite all right again," she told him tremulously.

"Please help me to sit up! There—there's someone there, waiting—someone I used to know."

"Do you want him?" said Silas.

She looked up into his rugged face and met the clean directness of his eyes. "Please, Silas!" she said.

He moved, straightening himself, and turned to the open door. "Will you get in? She's asking for you," he said.

Bobby sat up. She was deathly white still, but she was smiling with that high courage of hers which it took so much to daunt.

"It is really—you!" she said, and held out her hand to the stranger as he stood in the doorway.

He took it with a courtly gesture. His dark eyes swept her face. "I am afraid I have upset you," he said.

Bobby's lips were quivering piteously in spite of that gallant smile. She did not know what it was in him that so wounded her. It was something more subtle than words or touch,—something that seemed a part of the man himself.

"I am quite all right really," she said; "only a little tired after the journey."

"She has been ill," volunteered Silas grimly. "We had better get her out of this as soon as possible."

Bobby stretched out an appealing hand. "Silas, let me introduce you! This is—an old friend—Captain Thorgrave."

There was an instant's pause; then: "Perhaps I had better introduce myself to you both," the other man said. "I am now—Lord Ravencombe."

"Ah! Is that it?" said Bobby, with a sharp breath.

He answered her curtly, as one who seeks to check all

discussion at the outset. "Yes, that's it. Through force of circumstances I have become the temporary guardian of Rosemary, and that is how I come to be here. This gentleman whom you call Silas—" he turned to him almost aggressively—"your name is Hickory, I believe?"

"It is," said Silas, with a brevity that equalled his own. The other smiled, showing his teeth a little. "Then we are long-lost cousins or something of the kind. You've got a look of the family about you."

"That doesn't interest me," said Silas.

Ravencombe's smile became a half-smothered laugh that threw his long scar into terrible prominence. He turned again to Bobby.

"Don't you see the likeness between us?" he said.

She tried to avert her eyes from his disfigurement and failed. Somehow, very strangely, she was aware of a likeness between the two men—a resemblance so marked that she marvelled that she had never noted it before, yet could not have said wherein it lay.

She could not answer his question. She could only ask another of infinitely greater importance to her trembling heart. "Rosemary! What of Rosemary?" she said.

"She is quite well," Ravencombe answered, "and waiting for you. I've got a taxi engaged. We thought you would be alone."

"Let us go!" said Bobby.

He helped her to her feet and handed her down, while Silas turned to collect their belongings. They stood together on the platform for a few seconds, but they did not speak. It seemed to Bobby in the rush and roar of the station as if no words were left. In that amazing meeting she had glimpsed a gulf far wider than any mere

years of separation could have made, and deep within her she knew that this man—the lover of her youth for whom she had so long and faithfully waited—had never intended to return.

But even that thought, now that she was herself again, was not paramount with her. She dismissed it almost feverishly. What did it matter—on this night of wonders what did anything matter except Rosemary who was waiting for her—waiting for her?

"Can we get away now?" she said, as Silas descended.

Ravencombe signed to a porter. "The sooner the better," he said.

And then she found herself walking between them down the long platform, feeling very weak yet longing to force herself to a run, to shorten the span of time that still must pass ere she could clasp her darling in her arms again.

They were nearing the barrier when abruptly Silas spoke to her. "It seems to me that I am hardly wanted now," he said. "Wouldn't you rather go on alone?"

She turned and stared at him. Somehow the suggestion took her breath away. "Go on alone!" she repeated; then quickly: "Oh no—no! Please—please come too!"

"You are sure you wish it?" he said.

Her answer was so prompt and emphatic that it must have satisfied the most incredulous. "Quite—quite sure!" she said. "I should be—lost without you."

He accepted her assurance in silence, and the man on her other side sent him a curious glance. Their eyes met over her head in almost open challenge. But neither spoke. As they reached the barrier, Silas fell behind.

CHAPTER III

THE CONFLICT

THAT journey through the London streets seemed unending to Bobby. It was raining, and the roads shone like glass. She felt dazzled, bewildered, uncertain of herself, acutely conscious of a tension between her companions for which she could discover no remedy. She realized that Ravencombe had given a very definite hint to Silas and that but for her much more definite assurance he would have taken it. Strangely enough, obsessed as she was by the thought of Rosemary, she had time to be angry for his sake. And it was Dick—of all people, Dick—who had made her so. Dick, now Lord Ravencombe and a cousin of Silas! That was the amazing thing. And Silas who hated and despised the Thorgrave blood that ran so strongly in his veins!

By the fitful glare of the streets she watched his face, sternly emotionless, in front of her, and again she saw that likeness which till then had been hidden from her. They were utterly unlike—these two cousins, and yet so much alike that they might have been brothers. How was it that she had never seen it before? The answer came to her almost without her seeking. It was not the old Dick whom she had known in the long ago who resembled Silas, but this stranger who yet had a look of the old Dick about him and spoke with the old Dick's voice. Somehow, in totally different surroundings, they had developed along

similar lines. And she realized that while Silas had probably altered but little with the years, the other man had been changing day by day till now she found a being almost unrecognizable—yet still in some ways poignantly the same, and also somehow, unaccountably, displaying an elusive resemblance to one whom in earlier days she was certain he had never resembled.

It was all rather like a dream from which she could not disentangle herself. She even began to wonder whether it was possible that this curious resemblance which till now she had never seen had been a factor acting upon her sub-conscious mentality to induce the intimacy between herself and Silas which Rosemary and Matilda had so deeply resented. It had never occurred to her before that there could be any attraction save that of genuine friendship and gratitude. But now—she wondered.

Again her eyes sought Silas's face, and this time she found his eyes upon her in a straight regard that seemed to pierce her very soul. She met them for a space unfaltering, then the light passed and she could see them no longer.

Ravencombe's voice spoke beside her. "We are just there," he said.

The taxi turned a corner and stopped at last. Another glare of light burst in upon them, but she thought of Silas no more though it was his hand that helped her out and urged her swiftly into shelter from the pouring rain. She went through glass doors into a high hall, and looked around her eagerly. But only the casual glances of strangers met her gaze.

Ravencombe spoke again. "She isn't here. I've got a sitting-room. Go straight through to the lift!"

She went, and was aware that he followed her. In the lift she realized that they were alone, and sharply turned.

"Where is Silas?"

He had already shut the doors. "He stopped to engage a room," he said.

The lift shot upwards as he spoke, and for those few seconds they were alone. They were over almost before she had begun to realize them, but as they reached the fourth floor and stopped she knew that she had been under a close observation that had missed nothing.

"You lead the way!" she said, as she stepped on to the landing.

He did so in silence, and they went down a long empty corridor till they came at length to a door at which he paused. She was close behind him and quivering with eagerness.

Very suddenly he turned and faced her. "It was a pity," he said, "that you brought an escort with you. I wanted you alone to-night."

"Alone!" She went backwards with the words, her hand to her heart. "Where is Rosemary?"

He smiled at her. Why was his smile so terrible? Then very quietly he took a key from his pocket and opened the door, switching on the light.

"Come in here," he said, "and I will tell you!"

She obeyed him, trembling from head to foot. She found herself in a well-lighted sitting-room in which a meal had been spread. There was a door at the further end towards which she turned instinctively, but Ravencombe's voice arrested her.

"No, she isn't in there. I can't produce her for the

moment, though she is quite safe and happy; so you needn't be anxious. Take off your things and sit down!"

She turned swiftly upon him, all her joyful anticipation swept away in a wave of anger. "How dare you trick me like this?" she said. "Why did you say she was here?"

He shrugged his shoulders slightly. "I should have thought the reason was obvious. As for tricking you,—well, that was a game of your own starting many years ago."

She gazed at him, taking in every detail for the first time, noting the iron-grey of his hair, the bitter lines that the years had carved upon him, and the cruel scar which no years could ever efface.

Then, at the end of a deep silence, she spoke. "Dick, why—why didn't you come back before?"

He made her a curious bow. "At last," he said, "I have succeeded in attracting your attention. But I should have thought that once more the answer to your question was obvious. I had nothing to come back for."

The words were like cold steel, piercing her. She made a gesture that was unconsciously tragic. "Was I—nothing?" she said.

He raised his brows. "The answer to that," he said, "is not so obvious, I admit. But come and sit down, and perhaps we shall arrive at an understanding."

He motioned her forward, but she remained stationary. "Before I do anything at all," she said, "you must first—please—tell me the truth about Rosemary. Where is she? What is she doing? You—you can't mean to torture me by keeping it back?"

The words sounded strange even to herself. That Dick—that dear lover of hers—could have come back thus to

torture her seemed so monstrous, so utterly outside the bounds of possibility. And yet his attitude—his voice—his look—all conveyed the same. Mockery, cynicism, even malice, were there expressed. There might be more also. There might be fires of hatred hidden below the surface which she found so ominous. And this was the man for whom she had waited all the days of her youth.

But she maintained her self-control though he showed no sign of yielding to her entreaty. "You must please answer me," she said. "I can't think of anything—attend to anything until I know. That telegram——"

"I sent that telegram," he said.

"Ah!" Again she felt as if her heart would choke her. "Then—it was all a hoax! You can tell me nothing—you know nothing—about her?"

He walked slowly forward into the room so that she was obliged to follow. "On the contrary, I know almost everything about her," he said. "I have already told you that she is safe and happy, and that is the truth. But she is no longer in my keeping, or—in yours."

He reached the table and stopped before it to pour out a glass of wine. She watched him, fascinated. He turned towards her again, and she saw a strange, leaping light in his eyes that made him unfamiliar to her. The Dick Dynamo of old had been bold and daring, but his eyes had never held aught but love for her.

He held the wine towards her. "Come!" he said. "This is for you. It will help you to hold your own."

She took it from him almost mechanically, but the next moment she came to the table and set it down untasted. "Dick," she said resolutely, "we have got to understand one another."

He smiled, the baffling, fitful fire still in his eyes. "Which is exactly why I decoyed you hither, my dear Roberta," he said. "I have heard a good deal about you lately which does not altogether tally with my own conceptions of you. Take off your hat and coat and let me see you!"

She turned fully towards him. "No," she said quietly. "I am going again immediately. Now please tell me about Rosemary! I must know about her. You can't mean to keep it from me."

A hint of entreaty crept into her voice despite her determined effort to keep it steady. The man who faced her made a curious gesture as of repudiation.

"I have told you that she is safe," he said. "Nor has she come to any harm while in my company. I am sorry that the pleasure of meeting me is not sufficient to counterbalance your disappointment. I can only suggest that you make the best of a bad bargain—or shall we say a bad exchange not of your arranging?—and answer a few questions I have to ask. When you have done that, I will do my best to answer yours."

She saw that he was in earnest. Behind his bantering pose was deadly intention, and she remembered of old that Dick Dynamo had never been one to endure opposition to his will. She made a desperate attempt to master her impatience and to meet his mood undismayed.

"Well, Dick," she said, "what is it that you want to know?"

The flicker of a smile crossed his face, and she knew—just as Rosemary had known—that her motives were quite bare to his gaze.

"I should like to know everything, please," he said

smoothly. "But before you begin, may I request you once more to remove your hat? I want to see you properly."

She obeyed him without further hesitation, somehow realizing that she had no choice; and she saw his look change subtly as it dwelt upon the gleaming gold of her hair.

"So you are neither grey nor shorn!" he said. "I appreciate that. Why don't you sit down if you are tired?"

"I am just going," Bobby said.

"That depends," he remarked enigmatically.

Again, as if compelled, she took the chair he indicated, and doing so, acknowledged to herself that her strength was limited.

"That's better," he said. "Now begin at the very beginning and tell me everything that has happened to you since I saw you last!"

She looked up at him with her clear, unswerving gaze. "I don't think I have very much to tell," she said. "I have just kept on working."

His eyes held hers with an almost fierce intentness. "For—Rosemary," he said, his voice very level and distinct. "You hadn't got her to work for, you must remember, when I left."

"No. I know," said Bobby, and closed her lips firmly upon the words.

He marked the fact with a grim hardening of the features that gave them a stony, carved look. "Is that all?" he said.

"That's all," said Bobby quietly.

"You have no intention of telling me anything more?" he said.

Her eyes still met his without a falter. "No, Dick," she

said. "I don't discuss other people's affairs with anyone."

"You'd sooner lie," he said.

The colour rose and spread all over her face at his words, but she still continued to meet his look. "I should not lie to you," she said.

"Ah!" He laughed, though his face scarcely altered. "That is kind of you, Roberta, though I imagine it is only because you could not hope for any success if you did. Tell me, why have you never married in all these years?"

The colour deepened in her face, became a most painful blush. Her eyelids flickered a little, as though she would fain shield herself from that merciless regard of his. But she kept her head up still.

"I have had—other things to do," she said.

"Is that your sole reason?" he said.

She made a small unconscious gesture of protest, and locked her hands together. "It isn't quite fair to ask me that," she said.

"Oh, I assure you everything is fair at this stage," he declared. "Are you going to answer me—or must I draw my own conclusions?"

Again she made a small, quivering movement, as though the inquisition were more than she could bear. "I will answer if you wish," she said. "But I don't think it will help things very much."

"I do wish," he said briefly.

Her face was scarlet now, her lips trembling; but with a great effort she controlled herself to speak.

"I daresay I shouldn't have married in any case," she said. "I can't tell. But—I have always—until lately—regarded myself as engaged to you."

It was his turn to be discomfited, and though he kept

himself rigidly in hand, there was something about him—a subtle, scarcely perceptible change of countenance—that betrayed it.

"Oh, you stick to that story too, do you?" he said.

"What do you mean?" said Bobby.

He told her with a cynicism that but thinly veiled some deeper emotion. "The heart-ever-faithful fable. Of course it's a very touching one and can reflect nothing but credit upon you. I am rather surprised that you should take the trouble to repeat it to me, that's all."

"I don't understand you," said Bobby. The violent colour was fading from her face, leaving her haggard and strangely aged. "I am telling you the truth, Dick," she said almost pleadingly. "And you meet me with nothing but gibes and sneers. Why? What have I done to deserve it? How have I wronged you in all these years?"

"How have you wronged me?" he said. "You ask me that?"

"Yes, I do ask you." Her voice still trembled, but she spoke with more assurance. There was something about him that seemed to indicate that he had given ground before her. "I do ask you, Dick; because, as I say, until lately—I have always felt that you might come back to me, and I have held myself in readiness for you."

"Until lately?" he threw in.

She bent her head. "Yes. Lately—just lately—I had begun to feel that you would never come."

"Since when?" he said.

She hesitated for a second, then again raised her eyes to his. "Since Rosemary went," she said.

"Ah!" He made a sharp movement, but as swiftly

controlled himself. "Go on!" he commanded. "Tell me what made you feel that!"

She obeyed with absolute simplicity. "I had begun to wonder if you were still living, before that. After that, I can't tell you why, but I became somehow sure—quite sure—that I should never see—*my* Dick again."

He uttered a harsh sound that might have been either laugh or groan. "You were right there," he said. "You never will,—at least not the Dick you used to know. He was buried alive long, long ago, and though he lived on for a time, he died in the end—of starvation, suffocation, madness—whatever the poor devils generally die of after they have been bricked up long enough."

There was a wild ring of reality in his voice, and Bobby shuddered. It might have been a madman speaking, and yet in that moment she saw the things he saw. Instinctively she sought to turn him aside from contemplating them.

"We are neither of us what we used to be," she said gently. "Life won't let us stay the same. Perhaps we have both been through a good deal in our different ways; but, Dick, we needn't be bitter because we have ceased to be what we once were. It isn't our faults. I am not blaming you, and you mustn't blame me either. I have tried to do my best."

"You!" he said, staring at her. "You say that! You who took my life between your hands and broke it—like that!" He made a graphic gesture.

"I, Dick!" For a moment she met his look in blank surprise, and then suddenly she rose and stood before him. "You are wrong," she said steadily. "You are making a

mistake. Something must have happened which I have never known. What is it?"

"What about Rosemary?" he said.

"Rosemary?" She repeated the name with a soft, unconscious tenderness. "But I never told you of her. It couldn't have been—Rosemary."

"No, you never told me of her." Sternly he corroborated the statement. "But—wasn't it because of her that you sent me away?"

She still faced him. "Yes," she said. "But—I always meant at that time to come to you—afterwards."

"You meant to come to me!" There was something like desperation in his voice. "And I was to be kept in ignorance. You admit that! You dare to admit it!"

"No," said Bobby. "As your wife, I would have told you. But not otherwise."

"As my—" Something seemed to rise in his throat and choke him; he swung suddenly away, as if he could no longer bear to look upon her.

"I shouldn't have been justified in telling you," Bobby said rather piteously, "any more than I am justified in telling you now. Surely you can see that, Dick! It wouldn't be right or fair. I was bound to keep silence—if only for the child's sake."

"Ah!" He spoke with his back to her; his voice sounded strangled, as if he produced it with difficulty. "And it was for the child's sake—no doubt—that you wrote me that letter! Or was it—a last effort—on your part—at decency?"

"Which letter?" said Bobby. "I wrote you several; but you never answered them."

"That is another—lie!" He flung round again and

faced her, and in spite of herself she flinched a little, so awful was his look. "You have told me nothing but lies since you entered this room," he said, "and you dare to stare at me with those innocent eyes of yours as if you were the saint I always used to think you! I had one letter only from you, and that was to tell me you had decided to throw me over. No, you needn't deny it. It's too late. I was fool enough to let that letter wreck me. I went to the devil after it. Do you understand? Don't dare to tell me you never wrote it! I wouldn't believe you if you did. There is too much evidence against you. There is—Rosemary. You can't deny her. At least, you haven't tried to—yet!"

"Ah! I see," Bobby said. She was white now, white to the lips; but strangely strong, strangely sure of herself. "No, I haven't denied Rosemary," she said, and in her voice there sounded a note that was almost of exultation. "I hadn't thought of doing that. After all, she is my very, very own. Now tell me where to find her!"

She moved towards him where he stood near the door as she spoke, her pale face lifted and in her eyes a splendour that was in some fashion—as he had said—saint-like. There was no longer any hesitation about her, only a strength that was wholly irresistible because it was wholly of the spirit. Neither was there any vestige of anger in the look she turned upon him. Firmly and fearlessly it met his own, like a level lance superbly balanced. If the dark gulf that stretched between them had altered him, it had altered her also, but in a different way—a way that was supremely beyond all criticism because achieving a greatness that was not of earth.

As she stood there, there was a majesty about her that

dominated him, strive as he might against it. He saw her as the years of sacrifice had made her—a woman in whom all the beauty of womanhood had blossomed and now was bearing fruit. He had tried to thrust her down to a lower level, but she rose triumphant as if upon wings, above his sullyng touch. Without effort, without explanation, she stood vindicated. And he drew back from her, baffled, abashed even, knowing that he was not fit to be her judge.

She spoke again, standing before him. "Will you tell me where to find her?" she said.

And he answered her at last in a voice from which all arrogance, all bitterness, had passed.

"You will find her at the Peregrine Hotel in Warner Street. They were going down to Bode to-morrow."

"They?" questioned Bobby.

"She and Donald Ross," he said. "They were married in Italy a few days ago."

"Married!" echoed Bobby with a start.

"Yes, married. It was quite in order. I saw to that. There were a British consul and a British chaplain to tie the knot." The old mask-like self-control had returned to him. He spoke with the brevity of one not greatly interested. "They will tell you all about it no doubt. But you had better have something to eat before you go. Wait and I will fetch your friend Silas Hickory to join you!"

He returned to the door with the words, opened it, then paused. His eyes came back to her and dwelt upon her with a deep and intense searching; then dumbly fell away.

He wheeled and went out without another word.

CHAPTER IV

THE FAITHFUL FRIEND

"WELL?" said Silas.

He came to her as she stood, slightly bent, in front of the fire. She did not move at his coming, but as he reached her she lifted a white, dazed face which told him very clearly that she was nearly spent.

"Sit down!" he said. "You'll be better when you've had something to eat."

He put her into a low chair and turned to the table. She lay back, quite silent and passive, gazing straight before her.

He brought her food and placed it on another chair by her side; then, as she remained motionless, he began to cut it up for her, his dark face sternly intent.

"Come!" he said at length. "Can you feed yourself, or shall I feed you?"

She stirred at that and slowly raised herself. "Oh, Silas," she said, "what a lot of trouble I bring on everyone!"

"Not on me," said Silas, putting a fork into her hand. "There, that's the way! Now we won't talk any more until you've finished."

She recognized this as an order, and began to eat slowly, in silence. He stood by, gravely watching.

She looked up at him after a few moments. "Aren't you going to join me?" she said.

"No, thanks," said Silas. "I'll have something downstairs later."

She understood his reason as clearly as if he had expressed it, and said no more. When he brought her the wine that Dick had poured out, she drank it in silence.

"Getting better?" said Silas.

She managed to smile at him. "Much better, thank you."

"You're very tired," he said.

She was obliged to admit it. "I know. But I must see Rosemary before I rest."

"Well, where is she?" he asked.

"At the Peregrine Hotel in Warner Street. They are married—she and The Old Bean. Dick arranged it all. Oh, Silas—" her voice shook a little—"I do pray she will be happy."

"I think your welfare is of more importance at the present moment," said Silas, looking at her critically. "What did that mad hatter bring you here for?"

She shook her head. "I'll tell you another time. I was engaged to him once, but—something happened." She met his look with a certain wistfulness. "It's all over now, Silas. He doesn't want me any more."

Silas received the news with an inward remark which only found vent in a growl.

"I don't think I can eat any more," said Bobby. "Shall we go?"

"No," said Silas. "What's that thing for?" He turned to a telephone on the mantelpiece. "I'll ring up the Peregrine, and if they're there, they shall come to you."

"But we can't stay here," objected Bobby. "It's Dick's room."

"He won't be back again yet," said Silas. "When I saw him in the lounge just now, he was going out, said he had an engagement." He picked up the telephone. "What's the name? Ross?"

He proceeded to give his instructions, then turned again to her. His renewed scrutiny did not seem to afford him much satisfaction; but Bobby was impervious to that. She was used to Silas.

"Has that fellow been bullying you—upsetting you?" he asked at last.

She did not answer the question directly. "I should have been tired in any case," she said. "I'm afraid I'm not very strong yet. But I soon shall be."

"You won't be at this rate," he remarked grimly. "He played a deliberate trick to get you here, and then found it didn't answer. Is that it?"

She stretched up her hand to him as she sat. "Don't let us go into it now, Silas!" she said. "It has made no difference—of any sort—except that I know now that he will never come back. That dream is over. I am only sorry I didn't know sooner."

He held her hand with a close pressure. His look still searched her face as if dissatisfied. "There must be a reason," he said, after a moment.

"Yes," said Bobby very wearily, and closed her eyes as if she had no strength for more.

He continued to look at her for a space, still holding her hand, then as the telephone rang, he laid it quietly down and turned.

"Hullo! Is that the Peregrine Hotel? Is there a

gentleman of the name of Ross there? Please ask him to speak to me!"

"He is there?" asked Bobby's voice behind him.

He moved and looked down at her again. She was sitting upright in her chair, her face alert and eager. She had shaken her weariness from her like a clogging weight.

"Yes, they are fetching him," he said.

"Oh, beg him to bring her to me at once!" she said. "Tell him to be very quick! I can't—I can't wait much longer."

There was a ring of fever in her voice. As he waited, she got up and stood beside him.

"Let me take it when he comes!" she pleaded anxiously. "I think I can persuade him. Let me try!"

"Wait a minute!" said Silas gently. "Let me be sure of him first!"

He stood listening, and Bobby waited tensely beside him, her hands locked and nervously straining against each other.

"Ah!" said Silas at length. "Here comes someone! Hullo!" He spoke into the telephone. "Who is it? Mr. Ross? Who? Not Mr. Ross? Isn't he there? What? Left this afternoon? Was Mrs. Ross with him? Do you know where they went? Oh, all right. Thanks! Good-bye!" He rang off and turned to her. "Afraid we shall have to wait a little longer," he said. "They've left."

"Left!" Bobby said the word after him faintly, unbelievingly; her face was ashen. "Left!" she said again, as if questioning its meaning, and then suddenly something within her seemed to snap; she bowed forward into his arms with a low and exceeding bitter cry. "Oh, Silas

—Silas—Silas!” she sobbed brokenly. “I can’t go on! I’ve borne so much—lost so much! First Dick—and now my Rosemary—both gone—for ever gone! There’s nothing left for me—except to die!”

She was torn by wild weeping as she poured out the piteous words, and he held her as he had held her once before, not seeking to check her agonized outburst, only supporting her in the midst of it. It seemed that this was always to be his part, that he did not really count with her, that it was only in her extremity that she turned to him.

But even so, he upheld her without faltering, his face over her poor bowed head sternly controlled, almost rigid in its strength. When her anguish began to spend itself, he helped her to a chair and knelt beside her, still supporting her though his arms no longer encompassed her. And as she lay there weakly crying, he dried her tears once more with infinite patience, proffering no word of comfort, merely holding himself in readiness for her slightest need.

She turned to him at last like a worn-out child. “Silas, what am I to do? Silas, tell me what to do!”

“There is only one thing you can do at present,” he said. “And that is—rest. I have engaged a room for you, and your things are in it. Shall I take you to it?”

“Yes, yes,” she agreed hopelessly. “I can’t stay here.”

She made a movement to rise, and he helped her up. So weak was she after her breakdown that she could hardly stand alone. Yet she seemed scarcely to realize that it was his strength and not her own that supported her. Perhaps she had leaned on him too long to be aware of it.

She submitted to his guidance as it were instinctively. So much ascendancy he had established over her. But she might have been almost unconscious of his presence while she did so. It did not apparently matter to her in that dire hour of need whether he came or went.

Only, as he led her from the room did she give utterance to the first reproach he had ever heard from her. "Oh, Silas," she said, "why—why—why did you make me come back?"

He did not answer her, and in a moment she turned in quick distress, her old sweetness reasserting itself. "No, no, I didn't mean that. It's not your fault. Forgive me for saying it!"

To which he made steady and almost stolid reply, "There is nothing to forgive."

"I didn't mean it," she reiterated. "I only meant that we are so much better dead when there is nothing left to live for."

"Yes, I know," said Silas. "I know."

"I'm glad of that," she said pathetically. "Glad you understand."

"You needn't be afraid of my ever doing anything else," he said.

"Oh, thank you," she murmured. "Thank you."

But, though she was vaguely comforted by his assurance, it was more habit than gratitude that prompted the words. Silas would always be Silas, the strong and patient friend in need. There were no limits to his kindness and consideration. If there had been, surely he would have abandoned her to her fate long ago! She had never meant to take more from him than she could repay, and some day—when all this trouble was past—

she would make good the debt. There would be nothing else left for her. But while it lasted, she had no choice but to accept his service. He would not have suffered her to do otherwise. That was clear, and she was too crushed to do other than submit to his decision. She was in fact almost like a child in his hands that night, and when he told her that he had engaged a room for himself next to her own in case she should need anything, it seemed so natural that she scarcely thanked him for the thought.

"I am glad to know you are near," she said. "Oh yes, I will call you if I want anything; but I don't suppose I shall. Good night!"

She smiled at him as he went away—a small, wistful smile which to him was sadder than her tears.

CHAPTER V

THE AMBASSADOR

IT was late that night when Ravencombe returned to his room. His face had the ghastly pallor that sometimes indicates intoxication, but his step was firm and light, absolutely controlled.

He entered to find the viands that he had provided for his guest still spread upon the table, the lights full on and the fire still burning. His glance went round the room in a swift flash and came in the fraction of a second to a broad burly figure that awaited him, upright and silent, on the hearth.

"Hullo!" he said. "Hullo!" And in his voice was a soft, almost stealthy intonation. It did not betray surprise, merely the acceptance of a fact not wholly welcome.

"Hullo!" said Silas. "I've waited here to talk to you."

Ravencombe came forward with that quick, steady step. His eyes were intensely bright, the pupils abnormally large, giving him almost the look of an animal that sees in the dark.

He stopped at the table and faced his visitor with a certain jauntiness. "Is it peace?" he asked, lifting a decanter.

"That depends," said Silas.

"Have a drink!" suggested Ravencombe smoothly. "It may help you to a decision."

"No, thanks," said Silas curtly. "I'm on business. You would oblige me very much by not drinking any more till I've done."

"Should I indeed?" Ravencombe proceeded to pour out a drink for himself with a smile. "I'm afraid I'm not in a very obliging mood. But my own vicious tendencies don't prevent me admiring virtue in others. I can see you haven't had a drink all the evening. I suppose beer and cider are more to your liking than this sort of thing, but—" he glanced round the table—"I am afraid they were omitted from the feast."

"I don't want anything, thanks," said Silas. He spoke with square determination. "All I want is a straight talk with you."

Ravencombe's eyes took a second swift and mocking survey of him. Then he pulled off his overcoat and threw it over the back of a chair. His tall lithe figure in faultless evening attire made a striking contrast to that of Silas in the plain brown suit of homely cut which Mary was wont to lay out for him with assiduous care on Sunday mornings. Yet that strange resemblance between them which Bobby had detected still persisted. They both bore the unmistakable stamp of good birth.

Ravencombe swallowed half his drink and came to the fire. "You are welcome to talk so far as I am concerned," he said. "But I won't undertake to do the same."

Silas moved slightly to one side. There was nothing threatening in his attitude. It merely denoted the most inflexible determination. His stern refusal to take offence bore strong testimony to this. Every inch of him was regulated by an iron self-control. He ignored the other's scarcely-veiled contempt just as he had refused

to recognize Bobby's one-time efforts to keep him at a distance, employing what she had secretly termed his "steam-roller tactics" which were not always devoid of a certain subtlety despite their force.

"I'm sorry to intrude upon you," he said. "I assure you it gives me no more pleasure than it does you. But I've got to do it. You needn't think I'm trying to trade on any relationship between us either, for that is a fact which is a thousand times more objectionable to me than it can possibly be to you. And by that I don't mean anything personal. It's simply the Thorgrave blood which I detest—and always shall."

"I say," said Ravenccombe suavely, "you're awfully complimentary—to us both. Have a cigarette!"

He proffered his case unexpectedly, with a sort of lightning graciousness in the midst of conflict against which the most churlish could scarcely have been proof. Bobby, had she seen him in that moment, would have said that it was the old Dick come to life.

Silas took the cigarette. In view of what he had just said, he had no choice. But he did not light it. He set it on the mantelpiece.

"Look here," he said. "I'm coming to the point. You probably know what I'm driving at. It's Miss Roberta—and her love-affair with you. It's no concern of mine, I admit, why you've kept away from her all these years that she's been waiting and slaving beyond her strength. I'm not on to that. Things happen often. I know, that can't possibly be foreseen and allowed for. But now you're back—now you're back—" he repeated the words with insistence—"what the devil is it now? You play a trick to get her here, and then you set to work and

break her heart. What's the meaning of it? I want to know. I will know!"

Again he spoke with an emphasis that had the compulsion of sheer weight. But he was talking to one who paid small homage to open force.

Ravencombe merely lifted his eyebrows and lighted a cigarette.

After several seconds he permitted himself to ask a question which was more of the nature of a soliloquy than anything else. "Is she broken-hearted, I wonder?"

"She's down and out if you want to know," said Silas bluntly. "And I've got to know the meaning of it. She's done as much for you as any living woman has ever done for a man, uncomplainingly too when it's been enough to kill her. And it's always been with the hope of your coming back held in front of her. She'd almost given up hope when you did come back. And now what have you done to repay her? Just—trampled on her!"

His voice shook suddenly and his hands clenched, but in a moment he had controlled himself again. Only he moved a pace or two further away from the man whose eyes still seemed to mock him whenever they glanced his way.

Ravencombe took the cigarette from between his lips and examined it critically. "You're an extraordinary man, Hickory," he said, almost as if he were addressing it. "Do you really imagine that you can convince me that Miss Roberta—" he uttered the name with a faint sneer—"has been faithful to my memory all these years?"

"I know it," said Silas. "As to convincing you——"

"Yes, I am rather hard to convince." Ravencombe's attention was still concentrated upon his cigarette. He

spoke deliberately, rather monotonously. "You see, there is somewhat damning evidence to the contrary."

"What is that?" said Silas.

Ravencombe turned his head slowly towards him. His eyes with their extraordinary, rapier-like brightness came to Silas's and for the first time remained fixed with a kind of contemptuous tenacity.

"I think you can furnish the answer to that question," he said.

Silas's face was as a blank wall, betraying nothing. "I shouldn't ask you if I could," he said.

"No?" said Ravencombe. He continued to examine him with much the same attention as he had bestowed upon his cigarette. "Well, we will leave that for the moment," he decided finally. "It's my turn to ask something now. Why haven't you married her yourself?"

Silas made a slight involuntary movement. The question was a surprise. But he answered it without hesitation.

"I asked Miss Roberta—" he spoke the name with reverence—"to marry me some time ago. She refused me then—on your account."

"This is interesting," said Ravencombe. "And since then?"

"Since then," there was stern self-restraint in Silas's voice, "she has been very ill, and during her illness I think she lost hope. It was at the time of Rosemary's disappearance."

"And so she accepted you?" suggested Ravencombe.

"She said that she would do so when Rosemary was found. That was before we knew of your return."

Silas's words were brief and business-like; his face remained wholly expressionless.

Ravencombe turned to flick ash into the fender. "My return seems to have upset the apple-cart," he remarked. "But I still can't understand why the marriage did not take place long ago. It would have been far better for—Rosemary. And after all, she seems to have been the most important factor in Roberta's life."

"Rosemary and I have never had any use for each other," remarked Silas sombrely. "I doubt if it would have been better for her."

"Oh, indeed!" Ravencombe paused, his back half-turned. "You don't consider that your responsibilities extend to her then."

"My responsibilities! What do you mean?" said Silas.

Ravencombe faced him again, a very bitter smile on his face. "Oh, don't you try to stuff me with that aunt and niece fiction!" he said. "I've had enough of it."

"I'm not giving you any fiction that I know of," said Silas curtly. "In an affair of this sort one has to draw one's own conclusions. I drew mine long ago—as soon as I knew of your existence. I didn't know who you were; she never told me that. But I guessed that you had behaved like a damned scoundrel to her--though I never told her so."

His voice had taken a deeper note, but he still spoke with restraint. In the brief silence that followed, he stood with squared shoulders waiting for a counter-thrust, yet still resolutely master of himself.

But Ravencombe made none. He only stood staring

at him while the smile on his face slowly became one with the cruel scar that seamed it.

"Well," he said at length, "I'm glad that we've had this interview. It has elucidated one point at least. I see now that I have wronged you and I apologize. Perhaps you may feel moved to do the same when I tell you—on my oath—that I am no more Rosemary's father than you are."

There was no mistaking the sincerity of his voice in spite of that horrible disfiguring smile. Silas, grimly surveying him, knew that he spoke the truth.

He said nothing for several seconds while he readjusted his ideas. Then: "All right. I apologize too," he said, though somewhat as one making a concession. "But you had no reason for crediting me with anything of that sort, while you—you even ran away with the child. What did you do that for?"

Hostility bristled afresh in the question. Ravencombe made a half-whimsical, pacific gesture. "That," he said, "happened to be by her own wish. I've already been taken to task for it by the excellent young man who is now her husband, and luckily managed to establish the innocence of my motives and subsequent behaviour. Haven't you seen them, by the way? Didn't they come?"

"They had left the hotel," said Silas. "There was no getting hold of them."

Ravencombe clapped a tragic hand to his head. "Here have I been absenting myself in the haunts of vice all for nothing! I pictured a happy family re-union taking place. Instead of which, they've probably taken the night train for Bode."

"Very likely," agreed Silas with austerity. "But that

is a minor matter. They can be traced in the morning. But there are still several points to be cleared up. You haven't yet explained your attitude to Miss Roberta. I've got to understand that."

"Why?" asked Ravencombe.

"Because," Silas spoke very steadily, "I am out for her happiness, and it seems to me you've tortured her long enough."

Torture! It was the word that Bobby herself had used. Ravencombe made a wry grimace as he heard it.

"Frankly," he said, "I think I've put up with a good deal with regard to this subject. My attitude, as you are pleased to call it, to Miss Roberta is one of strict neutrality. She has my full permission to console herself with whomever it may please her to select."

He uttered the last sentence with a gleam of malicious humour, and Silas stiffened almost instinctively.

"That won't do," he said. "You were not in a state of neutrality when you took the trouble to get her here on false pretences. What was that for? I've got to know, so you may as well tell me at once."

"Oh, you're going to bully me now, are you?" said Ravencombe. "I shouldn't if I were you. It's such a waste of time."

Silas pulled himself in again with an effort. The gibing note in the other's voice was like a cold douche. It had the effect of making him feel at a disadvantage, almost in the wrong. Also, his sneers notwithstanding, there was something oddly likable about this man. He fenced with adroitness, but there was no active hostility behind his point. If eventually he inflicted a wound, it would be rather by accident than design. Silas even had

a disconcerting suspicion that he was rather favourably disposed towards him, and this—in spite of his most rigorous determination to maintain an unyielding front—was beginning to re-act upon himself. It is hard to force a quarrel upon one who persistently fails to see the necessity for one.

"I don't want to bully you," he said. "I only want to know the truth, and to make you realize—if I can—how abominably she has suffered. I've seen something of it, and I know."

"Ah!" Ravencombe made an odd movement, as if somehow the words pierced him unawares. He was looking at Silas speculatively, with a gradually awakening interest. "You say you are out for her happiness," he said. "That means, I suppose, that you care for her enough to give the past a more or less decent burial and—marry her. Well, my good fellow, why don't you start in and do it? I shan't get in the way."

"No, I know," Silas said. He turned very suddenly away from Ravencombe and stood staring straight before him for a few seconds. Then: "I believe I could do it," he said, his voice very low, strongly repressed. "I might persuade her to marry me. But—if I do, what's going to happen?"

"You'll make her happy presumably," said Ravencombe in his smooth emotionless tones.

Silas's hands clenched again, but it was not in anger. He stood rigid, as though he waited for something. Then, as suddenly as he had turned away, he wheeled back. "No, I can't make her happy," he said, and his voice held the brief stern ring of justice; no more. "She has always cared for you. She cares for you still, and I believe you

care for her—though you won't own it. But remember, you have no proof against her. And even if you had, what right have you to judge her? Is there nothing in your past that you would like forgotten—washed out? And are you so well off and happy that you can afford to throw away the love—and devotion—of a woman like that?" His resolution failed abruptly; he lifted his two hands clenched above his head. "My God!" he cried out in a voice that quivered and broke. "If it were only mine—only mine!"

"Steady! Steady!" said Ravencombe. "Look here, man, don't! Have a drink!"

He pushed forward his own glass quickly as Silas went forward with his arms upon the mantelpiece and his face buried upon them.

"Don't!" he said again. "Don't!" and laid an urgent hand upon him. "Pull up, man! Drink! Here it is!"

Somewhat the half-filled glass found its way into Silas's grasp, and he stood up and drained it; then, after a moment, turned round, his own master again.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Thanks! That was decent of you."

"I can be decent sometimes," said Ravencombe, with the ghost of his whimsical smile. "Look here! Sit down! We'll thrash this thing out. I'm not given to talking about myself, but I will for once. It may help. Anyhow, whatever you may think of me, I think you're damn' fine, and that stands."

It was in a sense a capitulation, and as such Silas recognized it. What he had been unable to accomplish by force had been done in a moment's weakness for which he despised himself. As he yielded to Ravencombe's in-

sistence and sat down, he realized with a dull wonder that all animosity between them was gone. By a fantastic turn of the wheel of Fate, this man Ravencombe—Dick Dynamo—was no longer an enemy but a friend.

The fact that he was sitting on his hearth still holding his glass seemed to place them on the footing of host and guest, and though he was aware of a certain relief he did not quite know how to deal with the changed situation. Ravencombe, however, was by no means at a loss. He possessed a mental agility that seldom failed him, and possibly the change of attitude was not as complete on his side as on that of Silas.

He poked up the fire hospitably, showing no signs of embarrassment, then took the glass from Silas's hand with a casual, "Here, let me get you a decent one!"

But Silas refused. His weakness was over, and he turned back doggedly to the matter under discussion, though he approached it now from a different angle.

"No, I won't have any more, thanks. I want to get on with this business, but I seem to have tackled it the wrong way round. I don't know how you got the impression that I've known Roberta for many years. I haven't. It's only six since she took Little Staple. It's a small farm next to my own and belongs to me. The old man—her father—died there. I didn't know her so well in his time. He was a recluse."

"What! Colonel Wendholme!" ejaculated Ravencombe. "He used to be the jolliest man alive."

"He wasn't in those days," said Silas. "He lived and died almost a stranger in Stapleton. It was after he went, when Roberta had sole charge of the child, that I began to try and lend a hand and so got to know her better.

You see, she did everything—literally everything—in that household, as well as ran the dairy and pigs and poultry. No man could have stood by and seen a woman slave as she slaved without doing something to help—though she wouldn't let me do much, beyond carting her pigs to market now and then and buying her calves." He paused for a moment or two; then: "That's how I came to care for her," he said simply. "I've never met with such pluck and independence in anyone. They lived on next to nothing, and she worked like a nigger, sixteen hours out of the twenty-four, and always smiling, always sweet and ready for the next job. I don't see how anyone—" he spoke with a kind of heavy defiance of circumstance—"could have known her as I got to know her without loving her. It was my own funeral anyhow. It didn't matter to anyone else. She never had any feeling for me except friendship. I know that all right. I always knew it. I was beneath her too."

"You may yet be Lord Ravencombe," remarked Ravencombe with his cynical smile.

Silas looked at him. "I'll hang myself in my own barn first," he said.

"Don't you be a fool!" said Ravencombe. "You can't quarrel with your own blood. It didn't appeal to me at first. I was last but one on the waiting list. But I'm getting used to the idea now."

"You're a gentleman," remarked Silas bluntly.

Ravencombe bent with one of his lightning movements and laid a sudden friendly hand upon Silas as he sat. "I'll tell you what I am if you really want to know," he said. "I'm about the damnedest rotter that God ever put breath into, and knowing you hasn't made me feel

any less so. Oh, let's talk sense if we can! You've told me your side of the story, now you shall hear mine."

He stood up again with the words and began to pace the room with that springy, animal-like tread of his while Silas remained seated, watching him with an odd dawning of sympathy in his eyes.

"I never expected to come into the title," Ravencombe said. "It might have made a difference if I had. I should probably have got married and lived a bit more respectably, though I don't know. I've been a free lance for a good long while now. There used to be four cousins between me and the succession, but two of them got killed flying and the other two petered out somehow, and the poor daft old man hung on till the only ones left to inherit were first myself and then you. Your mother seems to have been a cousin of my father; but I'm a bit hazy about it."

"It doesn't matter, does it?" said Silas.

"Not enormously at this stage," agreed Ravencombe. "But you've got to face the fact that you are my accredited heir. It's more than likely that I shall never have another."

"That isn't what we set out to talk about," Silas reminded him, still stubbornly tenacious to his point.

Ravencombe stopped to light another cigarette and threw him a half-bantering look as he did so.

"All right, man, all right. You shall have it," he said. "But if I've got to face my responsibilities, I'm damned if you shall shirk yours. It doesn't greatly matter, as you say; for I know very well you won't when it comes to the point. Here you are then! I've been what is known as an adventurer for the past twenty years or

nearly. I first met Bobby—" He uttered the pet name almost unconsciously—"as a very junior captain with no expectations in her father's regiment. We were stationed at Budhpore in the Central Provinces, and she and her sister came out one cold weather. She was exquisite, like a rose—like Rosemary. Of course I fell. So did everyone else practically. At least, I think we were about equally divided. Matilda had a good many admirers. I never knew quite why. I always thought her empty—rather stupid, though, I suppose, from the standpoint of sheer beauty, she may have been lovelier than Bobby. But beauty alone doesn't appeal to me—never did. Bobby—Bobby had brains as well—humour, sweetness, everything."

"I know," said Silas.

Ravencombe was prowling about the room once more, his head back as though he saw a vision. "I worshipped her like the rest, but I had nothing to offer her, so I held my tongue. I shall never forget how astounded I was when one day I met them out riding—she and Matilda—in charge of the Colonel's servant who was giving them lessons, and she deliberately gave them the slip and then when we were alone just put her hand into mine and said, 'Dick, why are you always struggling not to say to me what I want—so much—to hear?' " A queer sound, like laughter repressed by pain, broke through the words; but he went on with scarcely a pause, "After that of course it was all up with me. I was nearly mad with the joy of it. But I knew quite well I hadn't a chance with her father. He was out for much bigger game. So we settled to keep it dark for a time, and Matilda—who was also out for bigger game, but quite amiably disposed to

wards us—agreed to be given the slip with the groom whenever I met them, which was pretty often. It became an absolute joke between us. She and the soldier-servant would ride off in one direction and Bobby and I in the other. But the man—Alexander they called him—was a fellow I never quite trusted, and eventually we were given away. I always knew it was his doing though I couldn't bring it home to him. There was a most unholy row, and Matilda and Bobby were packed off to a hill station. The old man was furious with me, and it seemed to me that it was up to me to make good; so I got into touch with a relative of my mother's in California who had always wanted me to go out there and offered to chuck the Army if he would guarantee me a house and a screw that would justify me in taking a wife. I didn't want to chuck the Army in the least, but I wanted her—intensely, and I had no prospects." Ravencombe came to the hearth and stood gazing down into the fire. He might have been unconscious of his companion as he conjured up the picture of those long past days. "Well, then Matilda got engaged to her swell who was *aide-de-camp* to the Governor-General, and there was talk of a grand wedding. But I had secured my berth in California and sent in my papers before it was fixed, and I tried to persuade Bobby to marry me and come away then and there. But she wouldn't, though I knew she was hating every minute of it and would hate it worse when her sister was married and I was gone. She said she was wanted, and I couldn't move her, so I came away. But I got her father to consent to our engagement before I left, and we arranged that I was to come back and fetch her as soon as I had got a home

to take her to. So off I went—to make a home." A grim note of cynicism crept into his speech. "I didn't go straight to California. I went to England first to see my people. I had no letter from her while in London, though I wrote to her from every port we touched. I concluded she must have sent her letters to my final destination, and after a fortnight at home I sailed for America. When at last I got to my cousin's place I found an Indian letter waiting for me. It was from Bobby. She said that she had thought things over and come to the conclusion that she had made a mistake. It was all beautifully written, beautifully expressed,—perhaps a trifle stiff, but otherwise a masterpiece. She hoped I would forgive her for any disappointment she had caused me, but she was sure that I should see the matter with her eyes eventually. And it was better to be wise in time, was it not? Meanwhile, her sister's marriage had been postponed, and they were all coming home to England, so that as she was unable to give me any address she could scarcely hope to hear from me again. However, she would always think kindly of me, and she hoped that I would try to do the same of her. That, I think, was the end, though I am not sure that I read it all. Anyhow, it was the end so far as I was concerned. I don't quite know what happened after that. I wasn't actually mad, but I wasn't exactly responsible for my actions either. I felt as if a fire had been lighted inside me that was gradually consuming everything vital in me. I couldn't stay where I was or attempt to settle down to anything. I threw up the whole show and broke away. My cousin tried to hold me, but it only made things worse, and I cleared out. I needn't go into all the hor-

rible details. I've always tried ever since to forget each day as I got through it, to toss it on the rubbish-heap of time. Why I bothered to live I really don't know. Only somehow suicide never appealed to me. It isn't sporting to end your life just because it isn't worth living, though I've courted being killed over and over again. I went to Mexico eventually almost for the purpose, though I called it for the sake of adventure to myself. I used to do anything and everything in those days to deaden that awful feeling of being burned alive by a slow fire, or perhaps it was more like a corrosive acid that ate and ate always a little deeper into one's very being. I sinned all the sins that came my way and lived the life of several devils rolled into one. They used to laugh and call me the Prince of Evil. I don't quite know how I lived. We were a mad gang of profligates, and there was always some game on that spelt murder and sudden death. We dabbled in politics of course. Everyone does in Mexico. It's a land of quick promotion, and I became a sort of robber-chief—a dictator of bandits and cutthroats." He began to laugh under his breath in a subtle half-gratified fashion. His eyes were still upon the red depths of the fire. "I did a good many things that are not done either in love or war. I set myself impossible tasks and did them, just for the fun of the thing. I didn't enjoy it. I never enjoyed anything; but I'd got to the point where I didn't see why any lust should go unsatisfied, so I made a bonfire of all gentlemanly scruples and danced round it till nothing remained. They used to think I was mad, but I wasn't—at that time. I simply didn't care a damn what I did or how I did it. If people got in my way,—well, they were soon out of it, that's all. Whatever I

wanted, I took, and threw the rest away. I never felt affection or regard for a single being during all the years we made pandemonium in that extremely volcanic corner of the world. That part of me was atrophied completely by the corroding process aforementioned. Things that would once have turned me sick simply had no effect upon me. But I still maintain that I was sane, because I kept my reasoning powers. It took a mighty lot of scheming before the other side caught me at last." He showed his teeth in that dreadful, upward-reaching smile of his. "And even after that, I gave them a lot of trouble. They wanted me to split on the rest and I wouldn't. Not that I cared a row of pins if they were caught or not. It was only that—being British—I objected to coercion. They did their damnedest to me with the exception of killing me, which was the one thing I wanted them to do. I can tell you exactly what a hot branding-iron feels like—among other things."

"Damnation!" said Silas deeply.

The other started at the interruption and looked round. "Hullo! What's the matter? Oh, that's nothing—nothing! Why my dear chap,"—he stopped himself—"No, I needn't tell you that. I did go mad in the end, tore free and ran amok. That's how I got this wound on my head. My face was split right open. But I got away, and I've reason to believe I gave a good account of myself first. After that came a blank period which lasted some time. One of those queer jades of the Rahab persuasion got hold of me and hid and nursed me till the hue and cry was over. A good sort she was, but I found eventually that she'd knife me if I didn't give her the slip, so I cleared out and left that hell behind. Not from

any decent motive. I was sick and tired of it, that's all." He turned back to the fire with a gesture of weariness. "That's nearly all. I found my way back to civilization, and drifted to California again. I wasn't looking for my cousin, but he came upon me in San Francisco. I was pretty sick at the time and practically destitute and he took me back to his place. I don't know why people do these things unasked. I didn't want him to. But he was a good old chap. I stayed and worked with him for nearly three years. Then I heard from Raymond of old Ravencombe's death, and that I was the heir to title and estates, so I came back at last to enjoy the irony of it all. Being of a freakish turn, I gave my name as Graves at Bode because I didn't want everyone staring. And then —on Boxing Night—who should I find but the exact replica of Bobby herself, dressed as a bride, waiting for me?" He paused and stirred the fire thoughtfully with his foot as if to readjust some vision that he saw there. "That was about the shrewdest thrust Fate ever gave me," he said. "She was veiled at first, but there was something about her—her laugh, her general air—that made me determined to see more of her. So I inveigled her away from the rest, and after a little fooling I got her to my own room. There for the first time I saw her as she really was, and she recognized me as—Dick Dynamo—the man to whom her aunt had always been faithful! She had seen my portrait, it seemed. Poor little beggar!" Genuine pity sounded in his voice for the first time. "How horrified she was! So was I—when I realized—though I don't know why I should have been. I gave the show away, as I suppose I shouldn't have done if I had had time to think. And when she knew what it

meant—knew that the aunt business was all a myth—she threw herself on my mercy and begged me to take her away—which I did."

He stopped, but Silas asked no question, merely sat gazing straight before him in unbroken silence, his brows closely drawn as though he wrestled with some problem to which he would not give expression.

Ravencombe glanced at him, then went to the table and poured out a drink. He looked unutterably tired, almost too tired to be cynical.

"Well, that's all, Hickory," he said, "except that in the absence of her aunt I created myself her uncle and behaved with a moral rectitude that really surprised myself. I took her to Italy, and there eventually we were discovered by young Donald Ross—Rosemary's unromantic but very persevering lover, and since I judged him to be a suitable sort of lad and the maid was willing, I gave my blessing to their union and saw that it was done properly. Then we all returned, and I—feeling freakish again—laid my plans to receive Bobby alone. I didn't mean to behave like a cad. I only wanted to ask a straight question or two, and—yes—just to see her once again." He lifted the glass to his lips with the words and drank. "But you frustrated me. I turned savage when I saw you. I apologize once more. I know now I had no reason." He smiled at Silas, but the heavy shadow of fatigue still rested on his face. "I haven't talked like this for years," he said. "You brought it on yourself, didn't you? It's a mighty long story and hardly worth the telling, after all. But that's the end."

"Yes," said Silas, speaking as one who slowly awakes. "It has been worth it."

He met Ravencombe's eyes as he got to his feet.

"It has been worth it," he said again. "And if you've got any patience left, I'll tell you why. First, I am perfectly certain," he spoke with the deliberation of great emphasis, "that the letter you speak of, turning you down, was never written by Bobby. All I have ever seen of her convinces me of that. If I could convince you too, would it make a difference?"

Ravencombe lifted his shoulders slightly without replying. "Why do you get up?" he said. "I can see it's going to be an all-night sitting."

"No, it isn't," said Silas squarely. "It's practically over now. That letter was not written by Bobby, and, whatever she has to hide, there is no altering the fact that she has been waiting for you, hoping for you, all these years. Does that make no difference either?"

Ravencombe made a quick movement that was somehow like the plunge of a goaded animal, but as swiftly he curbed himself. "Oh, damnation, Hickory!" he said. "Even if you could prove her faithfulness up to the hilt a dozen times over, can't you see that the difference in me is colossal? What is there left in me worth having now?"

"Ah! That's another story," Silas said. "That's a matter which neither of us is qualified to decide. But this other rests with you. And I am prepared to give you my word of honour—my oath—that she has been waiting for you all this time. I've no proof to offer, except that Rosemary herself once showed me a photograph of you in corroboration of it—in order to discourage me. I think I have mentioned before—" he spoke with a certain dreary humour—"that she and I have

never had much use for each other. But she was not romancing about it. It was genuine. I'd found it out from Bobby herself before that." The humour dropped out of his voice, leaving it dead and toneless. "I knew it even before she told me. She is the sort of woman who could only care once. What's the good of talking round and round? I've done—I've finished—and I'm going. But just you remember this!" He paused a moment on his way to the door. "When a woman loves a man, she doesn't ask what his past has been. She simply gives him all she's got without a question, without even thinking of the past. If a man can't do the same,—well, he isn't worthy of her, that's all."

"Who said I was worthy of her?" flashed Ravencombe.

"No one," said Silas. "And perhaps it doesn't greatly matter. Anyhow, there's only one who can decide. Ask her!"

He was at the door as he ended. He opened it to go out. But Ravencombe's voice arrested him. Ravencombe himself came striding to him and gripped him forcibly by the arm, detaining him.

"Look here,—Silas!" he said. "We're both doggo and I won't keep you. But I must say just this. You're the whitest man I've ever come across and I'm damn' glad I've lived to meet you. If I could give you—the woman you love—to-morrow—to-night even—I would."

Silas stood facing him in his square forthright fashion. His eyes under the thick black brows were uncompromising in their utter directness. The other man was deeply moved and showed it, and in the showing the years fell from him, and he was young and keen again, save for the long cruel scar which marred the look of youth.

Silas spoke, breaking a silence that could not have existed between them earlier. "Do you say that because you no longer care yourself?"

"No," said Dick Dynamo as if compelled, and then confirmed the admission with a brief, half-grudging laugh. "Damn you,—no!"

It was an open admission of defeat just as his earlier gesture had been, but Silas made no attempt to press his advantage any further. He only said as their hands met in an almost involuntary grip of friendship, "That's just what I wanted. Thanks!"

They parted thereafter without further words.

CHAPTER VI

THE RETURN

OUT of a night of troubled sleeping and waking—a night that seemed as if it would never pass—Bobby came at length. The weariness of travelling and the subsequent strain and disappointment were still upon her, but she exerted herself to meet the new day with a brave spirit. As she dressed, putting her weakness resolutely behind her, she thought of Silas, and of all that he had been to her the previous night.

"How ungrateful I was!" she told herself reproachfully. "I wonder—did I hurt him?"

She had been terribly overwrought, had said things which should never have been uttered. Yet somehow she clung to the conviction that it did not matter what she said to Silas, because he always understood.

By the grey morning-light she brought herself to face the thought of Dick. All through the night she had as it were been hiding her eyes from it as a child that fears to look upon some awful apparition. But now she braced herself to meet it without shrinking. All the long years of waiting were over. Dick had returned. It seemed incredible that that fondly cherished vision of her youth could thus have been shattered at one devastating blow, so faithfully had she kept his memory in her heart. That Dick—her Dick who had worshipped her so—could ever

have come to her thus with that cruel devil of mockery and scepticism in his eyes was a thing so monstrous, so beyond all possibility, that she questioned with herself if she had really seen it or if it could have been some dreadful nightmare with which fever and fatigue had seared her brain. And yet in her heart she knew that it was starkly true. Dick had come back to her with hatred in his soul. Dick no longer believed in her, no longer wanted her—had not wanted her during all those years that she had waited so patiently and trustfully for him. It was so amazing a thought that she could not cope with it. It had been so far easier to believe him dead. Ah well! He was indeed dead to her now. She was conscious of a sudden passionate hope in her heart that she would never see him again. Her dream had been so precious to her, so tenderly guarded. And now that he had wrenched it from her, she felt as if her very soul were bleeding.

"There is nothing left," she said to herself again. "Why am I still alive?"

She dressed mechanically, taking no note of time, until a quiet knock at her door aroused her.

She went and opened it, and found Silas, calm and purposeful as ever, waiting outside.

She greeted him with outstretched hand; she was in sore need of a friendly clasp just then.

"It would be you," she said, with her wistful little smile. "Have you come to call me to breakfast?"

"Wouldn't you like it upstairs?" said Silas.

She shivered a little. A window was half-open down the passage, and the raw cold of a winter morning in London was in the atmosphere.

"No. I'll come down with you," she said.

"Put on your coat then!" said Silas, and she turned back to obey, still feeling mechanical, strangely numbed on the surface, though aware of a dull gnawing of pain beneath.

As she joined him, he was stolidly shutting the window that had admitted the draught to her. They went on together to the lift.

He did not speak as they descended, but she noted with a dim wonder that his presence seemed to dispel the sense of being in an alien atmosphere. In some fashion she could not fathom, he dominated his surroundings. Entering the vast, dreary dining-room with its bewildering sea of tables, she drew instinctively nearer to him. There was a feeling of home about him that gave her comfort as physical warmth gives comfort to the half-frozen.

He conducted her to a table close to a roaring fire, and she went to it thankfully, stretching her hands to the blaze. There were but few people in the room, and she realized that it was early.

He did not ask her what she would have, but gave his orders with clear conciseness, and then joined her before the fire.

"Our train leaves at ten," he remarked.

She started a little. "Oh! Where are we going?" she said.

He pulled out a chair from the table and placed it for her straight in front of the fire. There was no one very near to them, and to Bobby it was as though they were isolated in the midst of a grey sea. She was definitely aware of no one but her companion. All the rest was

but a dim impression of a dreariness so far-reaching that she had no desire to contemplate it.

"We are going home," said Silas.

The glow seemed to reach her heart, and she leaned nearer to it. "But we haven't found Rosemary," she said.

"Yes," said Silas rather curtly. "Rosemary is found. She is at Bode, waiting for you."

"At Bode!" She turned back to him eagerly, her face alight. "Oh, Silas, is she really there?"

He looked at her, and she thought his face was grim. "Yes," he said. "A message came through this morning. They had been to Staple Farm and found us gone. Young Ross rang up early. I spoke to him, and told them to stay where they were at *The King's Head* till we got back."

"Oh, Silas!" Bobby breathed again, and a great quiver of emotion went through her. She leaned her head on her hand. "I shall really see my darling to-day," she whispered. "Thank God—oh, thank God!"

Silas remained silent and immovable by her side—a dumb bulwark of strength—till presently she looked up again.

"Was that all he said, Silas? She is quite well, is she? Everything is all right?"

"Quite, I believe, so far as they are concerned," said Silas.

She thought his tone unsympathetic. "Why do you say that?" she asked, puzzled. "Isn't it all right for everybody? Shouldn't we be glad for their sakes—if they are happy?"

"Certainly," said Silas, in a voice that conveyed nothing whatever. "I am very glad that they are happy."

She did not understand his attitude but, concluding that it was probably in some fashion on her account that he refused to be enthusiastic over the turn of events, she pressed him no further. The vast relief of his news was such as almost to make her wonder that she retained her balance, but the fact remained that something held her back from being overwhelmed by it. Perhaps she had sat in darkness too long to realize the light now that it had come. Or perhaps the bitter disillusionment of yesterday had taken from her the power to feel acutely any more.

When breakfast came, she turned round to the table with a subdued sense of hope deferred. Her anxiety was lifted, but it had so bowed her down that she could not recapture her old buoyancy of spirit. When once she had held Rosemary again in her arms and satisfied herself that all was well with her, she felt that she could quite thankfully fold her hands and die.

"You're not eating anything," said Silas, and she roused herself and made an effort for his sake.

She knew that he watched her narrowly and she did her best, but she could not muster any appetite, and she was glad that there was no time for dallying. The brief space that remained seemed to pass like a dream. She went back to her room to put her things together, and Silas went to his. She had the feeling that he was watching over her the whole time. Did he fear that Dick Dynamo would reappear to waylay her, she wondered? She had no fear on her own account. Dick—her Dick—had gone into the past, and she would never see him

again. The romance of her life was dead, and nothing could ever bring it back to life. The ruthless stranger of yesterday had no power to disturb her further. He had done his worst, and it was all over. No, she had no fear for herself. She had nothing left to lose.

She scarcely spoke on the way to the station, and Silas sat beside her in vigilant silence. It was raining, and the streets were grey. The cold pierced her, and again scarcely consciously she drew a little closer to him. He stooped without words and wrapped a travelling-rug more firmly round her.

"I shall be so glad to get home," she said, as they neared the terminus.

And he answered gravely, "Yes, it's the best place."

He made every possible provision for her comfort during the journey. There were not many people travelling, and he secured a compartment for her without difficulty.

He also obtained a luncheon-basket. "It will save you the trouble of moving," he said.

He made a cushion of his coat and persuaded her to lie down when the train started, and she lay with closed eyes while he went to the further corner and left her alone.

Perhaps it was the motion of the express that presently lulled her into a state of semi-consciousness that resembled the outskirts of slumber. All through the night her brain had been capable neither of rest nor of coherent thought, but lying thus, with the certain knowledge that she was really on the right track at last, a sense of repose came upon her which gradually restored the power to think. After more than an hour of complete inertia, her mentality began to awake and ideas to form again in more orderly array.

During their first stop, when Silas quietly crossed to the carriage-window by her side and blocked it with his bulk, she looked at him and spoke.

"Silas!"

He looked down at her. "Are you wanting anything? I could get you a cup of coffee."

"No, thank you," she said. "Don't let anyone get in if you can help it!"

"They're not going to," said Silas.

She smiled rather wanly. "And don't go away again when we start!" she said. "I—want to speak to you."

"All right," he said.

He continued to fill up the window until the train was once more on its way. Then he turned round to her again.

"What is it?" he said.

Her face of white exhaustion still sought to show him a smile. "Just sit down!" she said. "I'll tell you in a minute."

He sat down opposite to her as she desired, and she lay looking at him with great intensity for several seconds. He waited with a massive patience for her to speak.

She did so at last, slowly, as though choosing her words. "Silas," she said, "I know you will tell me the truth—because you always do. Silas, did you see any more of—Dick—last night, after I left you?"

He leaned quietly forward. He had known that sooner or later that question must come. Very steadily he answered it.

"Yes. I went back and saw him. But I can't tell you what passed between us. I'm sorry."

A faint sigh escaped her. "You didn't—quarrel?" she said.

"No," said Silas.

"I'm glad of that," she said, and was silent for a space, still looking at him with those intent blue eyes that seemed so large a part of her.

At last she spoke again. "I don't want to know all that passed. Only one thing! Silas, will you tell me one thing?"

"What is it?" he said.

She stretched out a hand to him in a pleading, pathetic gesture. "He hasn't made you hate me, has he?" she said, and her lips were trembling as she asked the question.

He took the hand and laid his face down upon it. "Nothing—nobody—not God Himself—could make me do that," he said in a voice that shook.

"Thank you," she whispered. And then, with an effort, "What I really wanted to ask was this. Was it because—because he told my Rosemary something that—turned her against me that she went away with him—like that?"

Her question went into silence and by silence he answered it, his head still bent over her hand.

A long, weary sigh came from Bobby, and then, "Thank you," she said gently and slipped her hand away.

When he looked at her at length, he saw that her eyes were closed; and he got up quietly and moved back to his own corner.

CHAPTER VII

FORGIVENESS

THE rest of the journey passed without any incident or intimate talk. Bobby lay for the most part perfectly still, often with closed eyes. But she did not sleep, and Silas knew that she did not sleep. Covertly he watched her, his face set in lines of hard and uncompromising endurance. When the luncheon-hour came, he waited upon her wordlessly, as a slave might wait upon an empress—though there was little about Bobby to warrant such an attitude. She looked crushed—too broken-hearted even to weep.

They had to change for the final stage of the journey, and Silas took her to a fire in the waiting-room where she sat as one in a sad dream for the half-hour that elapsed before the train for Bode came in.

"I feel as if I had been away for weeks," she said to him, as they climbed into it.

"I know," he said. "And all for nothing!"

"Not quite all for nothing," she corrected gently.

The train loitered interminably along the branch-line, and it was four o'clock ere Bode was reached. It was market-day, and the station was busier than usual. Descending, Bobby found herself close to Old Roper the veterinary.

He started at the sight of her, gave her a hasty greeting, and almost precipitated himself into the crowd.

"Why did he do that?" she said to Silas, but Silas did not hear.

"Wait a minute!" he said. "I'll get hold of a conveyance somehow."

"There's the omnibus from *The King's Head!*" she said. "Let's go in that!"

But for some reason he held her back. "No, no! I'll get something else."

It was no longer raining, but heavy clouds were obscuring the last of the daylight. Bobby became aware of something ominous in the atmosphere, and felt as if an icy hand had clutched her heart.

"What is it?" she said nervously. "Ah, there is Mr. Everett! See, Silas! Perhaps he—"

She broke off. Everett had seen her also—she was sure of it—and had swiftly turned away.

She stood shivering on the path of the station-approach which adjoined the market, while Silas plunged across the road and took forcible possession of a shabby cab which was waiting on the off-chance of securing a passenger. Then in a sudden panic she followed him with limbs that trembled uncontrollably, and almost fell into the ramshackle vehicle which he held open for her.

"Why didn't you wait?" said Silas.

She answered him half-hysterically. "I couldn't—I couldn't. I'm sure something has happened. I've seen it in two faces—old Roper—Everett! Silas, if it's Rosemary—"

He took her hand and held it very tightly. "It isn't Rosemary," he said. "She's all right. You'll be with her in ten minutes."

"Are you sure?" she said, clinging desperately to that

sustaining hand. "You wouldn't say it, I know, if it weren't true!"

"No," said Silas. "I shouldn't."

She did not question him further, but sat in a scared, quick-breathing silence while they clattered along the High Street of Bode.

Only, as they neared *The King's Head*, she turned to him, her hand still clasping his, and said hurriedly, piteously, "Silas, are you sure I'd better go on? Will she—want to see me?"

"My dear," he said, "she's longing to see you. Ross told me so to-day. It's what they've come for."

That reassured her, and as they jolted on in the darkening evening she began to take courage again. But when at last they came to a standstill before the old hotel, she said nervously as his strong grasp relaxed, "Don't go away and leave me, Silas! I'm sure to want you in the end."

"I shall be there when you do," he answered quietly.

They entered through the swing-doors, and Bobby's glance went eagerly round. The deep shadows of evening filled the place, and her first impression was that it was empty. Then a solid, thick-set figure detached itself from the gloom and came to her.

"It's me—Donald—The Old Bean," said a voice she remembered. "You're wanting Rosemary. I made her wait for you upstairs."

Somehow she found his arm round her as he propelled her to the stairs, and she wondered a little at his action though it did not seem wholly unnatural.

"I hope you don't mind our getting married," he said,

as he guided her upwards. "We're awfully happy together. But we want your blessing of course."

She could not answer him for the hard beating of her heart. She murmured something inarticulate, to which he made even more incomprehensible reply.

"Ah! I was afraid you might hear of it first. I'm fearfully sorry about it. But Rosemary is here to comfort you. You must let me know if there's anything I can do."

And then they were at the top of the stairs, and she heard the swinging open of a door and the rush of eager feet.

"Aunt Bobby—oh, Aunt Bobby!" cried Rosemary's voice.

And Bobby found her own in throbbing, passionate answer, as she strained the lithe young figure she could scarcely see faster and faster to her breast: "My precious, precious Rosemary! Thank God for giving you back to me! Oh, thank God—thank God!"

With Rosemary's arms tight about her, she went into a room where the firelight gleamed; and the door was shut gently upon them by The Old Bean, who then went softly away.

"Aunt Bobby!" Rosemary said again and again. "Aunt Bobby—darling—darling! Have I really got you at last? Oh, why did I ever go away from you?"

Her face was all wet with tears which Bobby tenderly kissed away. "My sweet one!" she said fondly. "There! Let us sit down and hold each other—just hold each other!"

She sank into a low chair before the fire while Rosemary knelt beside her, rocking to and fro, and still clinging-

ing to her as though she could never bear to relax her hold again.

"Will you ever forgive me, Aunt Bobby darling?" she whispered presently. "I don't know how I ever came to do it."

"I know, dearest," said Bobby.

"You know?" Rosemary's clasp was almost convulsive.

"Yes. And I understand," Bobby spoke very steadfastly. "To understand is to forgive. I have seen Dick, you know."

"Oh, Aunt Bobby! And did he tell you? Did he tell you?" Rosemary drew back a little to look for the first time upon the beloved face as revealed by the firelight.

"Tell me what, darling?" Bobby's clear eyes met hers with unfaltering directness.

It was Rosemary who flinched and lowered her own. "That he loved you," she said under her breath.

"Oh no, dear. He didn't tell me that." Bobby's denial was as unblanching as her look had been. She put her hands upon Rosemary's shoulders, searching the sweet, downcast face with a loving scrutiny. "My love story was finished long ago," she said. "But I want to hear all about yours, my darling. May I hear it?"

Rosemary did not lift her eyes. She had begun to tremble. "Aunt Bobby," she said, "I've got to tell you something else first—something I thought perhaps you'd hear before you got here. But I see you haven't and—and—The Old Bean says you've been very ill and I'm to break it gently. Aunt Bobby—Aunt Bobby dear—" she lifted her eyes now, and they were wide and scared; her

voice shook in piteous distress,—“I’ve never done it before, and—and I don’t know how to begin.”

“My little girl, what is it?” said Bobby, drawing her close again. “What could it possibly be that mattered now I have you safe? There, tell me, my little one! What is it? Don’t be afraid! There is nothing that can really hurt me now that I hold you in my arms.”

“Oh, Aunt Bobby, you’re forgetting someone!” whispered Rosemary, with her face in Bobby’s neck.

“My dearest, who?” said Bobby, puzzled.

Rosemary’s arms closed suddenly with such tightness that she gasped for breath. “Aunt Bobby, it’s—it’s—Aunt Matilda!” she said.

“Matilda!” Bobby stiffened as she sat; it was as if an icy blast had struck her. “What of Matilda?” she said. “Rosemary, what of Matilda?”

Her voice held command—such command as Rosemary had never attempted to resist. She did not attempt to do so now, but answered in a shocked undertone: “She died—oh, darling,—she died—early this morning.”

“Matilda!” Bobby’s lips uttered the name almost mechanically. She sat without stirring, still rigidly holding Rosemary. “Matilda—dead! Matilda!” She spoke incredulously, even suspiciously, but not as one vitally concerned. “What do you mean, dear?” she said.

Rosemary continued to cling to her, her face hidden. “It’s been very dreadful,” she told her rather breathlessly. “It was all so sudden. We didn’t get down here until late last night, and it had happened then. It seems she was depressed after you left, and Dr. Bellamy thought it would do her good to get up and go for a run in his car. He had to call at Joe Brant’s place, and you know that

steep bank there? Well, while he was out of the car, something happened that the brake slipped and it ran down backwards and turned over. She didn't know how to stop it, and there was no time."

"She was killed?" asked Bobby in the same calm, detached voice.

"No, not then. She was pinned underneath, and they had a lot of trouble to get her out. But she was unconscious. She didn't suffer. She never suffered at all." Rosemary spoke with a sort of desperate rapidity. "They got her to Joe Brant's cottage at last. She was terribly injured, and they knew she couldn't get over it. Dr. Bellamy was nearly beside himself. They didn't know how to get hold of you till the Hudsons thought of asking Peter, and it was too late then to get you back again the same night. We got to Staple Farm while they were discussing it. And oh, Aunt Bobby, it was dreadful—it was dreadful—especially to find you gone." Rosemary's tears flowed afresh; she was evidently worn out with the prolonged strain.

"I thought I was going to you, child," Bobby said, tenderly stroking her hair. "I should never have gone otherwise."

"I know—I know. It was Dick's doing. Silas told The Old Bean on the telephone this morning. I did think Dick meant to play the game when I heard. But he hasn't—after all." Rosemary began to sob. "And now I've gone and married The Old Bean I shan't be able to take care of you either!" she ended piteously.

"Darling, don't let us waste time worrying about things that really don't matter!" said Bobby gently. "Finish about Matilda? Did they take you to her?"

"Oh yes, I went—I went." Rosemary made an effort to control herself. "I was very frightened because they said she was dying. But I didn't mind so much when I saw her. She looked so calm and beautiful, just as if she were lying asleep. And The Old Bean stayed with me behind the curtain and held my hand most of the time. She didn't open her eyes for ever so long. We began to think that perhaps she was dead already when she suddenly opened them quite wide and looked at me. Oh, Aunt Bobby,—" Rosemary's arms tightened again to the clinging hold of a scared child—"I didn't know that when people were dying they could see so far."

"What did she say to you, darling?" questioned Bobby, still smoothing the bright head.

"She didn't speak at first," murmured Rosemary, "just lay and looked—and looked. And then, when she spoke, I saw that she thought I was you. Was it wrong of me, Aunt Bobby? I let her think so."

"No, darling, of course not!" Bobby spoke with loving reassurance. "Tell me what she said!"

"Oh, she said—she said that you needn't trouble any more about her, and she was sorry to have been such a burden. And then she began to talk about me." Rosemary's head sank a little lower on Bobby's breast. "I'll tell you just what she said. The Old Bean said I must. She said, 'Don't worry about the child, Bobby! She won't go under as I did. There's too much of Alexander in her for that. You can tell her the truth when I'm gone. It's better that she should know, and it won't make any difference to me.' " Rosemary halted a little. "I'm trying to tell you exactly what she said," she mur-

mured pathetically. "It isn't very easy, though I shall never forget it."

"Yes, tell me, darling!" said Bobby, softly. "I think you will manage to forget—some day."

"Well, then she seemed to wander a little—to go back to when she was a girl in India, and she talked of that wedding-dress of hers and of a man called Adrian—a man she seemed to care for." Rosemary spoke a little vaguely. "I'd never heard of him before, so I could only sit and listen. I thought it would upset her if I said anything."

"Adrian Tressider—the man she was engaged to," said Bobby. "The man I wouldn't let her marry."

"Yes—yes, she said that. 'You wouldn't let me have him,' she said over and over again. 'You wouldn't let me have him, though it broke my heart to give him up.' Aunt Bobby, why—why wouldn't you let her?"

Rosemary whispered the question with a shrinking downward motion, but Bobby stooped and raised her up again.

"Oh, my darling, I have so prayed I might never have to tell you this," she said. "But God knows best. It was because I found out that she was going to have a child, and she wanted to marry him without telling him."

"Ah!" Rosemary said. She lifted her face, breathing hard and fast as though she fought against suffocation. "It was that—it was that! Well, let me tell you the rest now, and then—then you must tell me something, dear, dear Aunt Bobby. She said, 'You wouldn't let me have him. You broke my heart—ruined my life. And so—I ruined yours. That is why Dick never came back to you.' "

"Ah!" Bobby said. She too drew a sharp breath; it was almost an exclamation of pain.

"She said," went on Rosemary, "I took my revenge—I've been taking it ever since. I stopped your letters to Dick and his to you. I wrote to him in your name and put an end to it all. It wasn't all revenge, though. It wouldn't have been worth it just for that. But I wanted you. I couldn't have faced life without you. I was too scared—too desperate.' That was when I began to feel sorry for her, Aunt Bobby. It was as if something outside herself—something very relentless had been making her say it all until she came to that. And then—then I saw it was poor Aunt Matilda after all, who so hated hardships and difficulties, and never could do anything for herself. And I was sorry for her, I was sorry. I felt I understood how terribly badly she must have wanted you, to—to do a dreadful thing like that. I said to myself, 'If I were really Aunt Bobby, I shouldn't hate her for it. I should forgive her.'"

"Oh, child!" Bobby said in a low broken whisper and bowed her face upon Rosemary's hair.

"Don't cry, darling!" whispered back Rosemary. "Dick will soon know. And he loves you—I know he loves you still."

But Bobby uttered a heavy, tearless sob. "Too late!" she said. "Too late!"

There followed a silence during which it seemed as if some struggle were going on in the elder woman's soul. But when she raised herself at last, her face was calm.

"Tell me the rest now!" she said.

"That's almost all," said Rosemary. "The end was very near, and her eyes got deeper and deeper as though

they saw far, far beyond anything that we could see. She couldn't move at all, but just at the last she said very clearly, 'Will you forgive me, Bobby girl?' And I—I'd no right to do it, but I simply had to—and I knew you would have done it if you'd been there—I got up and bent over her, and I said, 'Yes, dear,' as if it had been you. Aunt Bobby, she didn't know the difference. She just smiled at me—and died."

Again there fell a silence. Bobby's hand still stroked the girl's head with a tender, soothing touch, but her eyes were fixed and remote. She might have been in a trance.

Rosemary stirred at length, looking up at her as though half-afraid. "Aunt Bobby," she said pleadingly, "you're not vexed with me?"

Bobby shook her head. "Why should I be?" she said.

"For saying that—when she wanted it so." Rosemary's voice was trembling.

Bobby's eyes came down to her. "My child," she said very solemnly, "if you can forgive her—so can I."

Rosemary shrank again involuntarily. "You mean—" she murmured faintly.

"I mean, sweetheart," Bobby said, "that you were the child she bore."

"Yes, I thought it must be that." A violent tremor went through Rosemary, but she controlled herself with a supreme effort. "And she didn't want me. She hated having me. She never liked me. Aunt Bobby, Aunt Bobby, who was the man? Tell me!"

Bobby's look changed. Her arms went round her again, clasping her, sheltering her. "My little darling," she said with such a wealth of mother-tenderness in voice and action as even Rosemary had never known from her

before, "spiritually you are mine, and always have been from the moment of your birth. I tended you—guarded you—loved you—I took you for my own—my very own—a treasure sent by God to me. I shut the gate upon everything that was shameful. I marked it Private, and no one has ever opened it since. Need I open it now—even for you?"

But though Rosemary clung fast to her, the blood that was in them both prompted her answer. "Please, Aunt Bobby dearest! Just once!" she whispered.

And so, holding her darling close pressed to her heart, Bobby opened the gate at last. "His name was Alexander—a soldier-servant of my father's—a groom. He taught us to ride. I don't know what happened to him. He may be dead. But anyhow he never knew. He never counted at all."

She ceased to speak. What it had cost her, even Rosemary would never know—Rosemary to whom the revelation was as gall. They remained there in the firelight, clinging together and not speaking for a long time, and during that time there was between them an inner communion such as is given to the very few.

In the end Rosemary lifted her head with a resolute, courageous movement and looked into Bobby's tired, sweet face.

"Thank you for telling me, darling," she said. "Thank you—thank you for all. There's just one thing I'm going to tell you now. Though I've been so bad—so wicked, God heard you praying, and He kept me safe, and—and—it was He Who sent me back to you, Aunt Bobby. I want you to know that, so that—so that you can keep on praying for me, darling, and ask Him—please ask Him—to

make me good—like you. Will you, please, Aunt Bobby?"

Her eyes, clear and steadfast as Bobby's own, sought and found their answer. Very tenderly Bobby drew her close again and kissed her. And her kiss was a benediction.

CHAPTER VIII

THE INDOMITABLE

"EH, dear!" said Mary. "She was always a poor thing, but it's hard to believe she's gone. Little Rosemary, too, looking so sweet and bonny, with that young husband of hers just worshipping her with his eyes wherever she goes! There's a love-match, anyway, though she's such a baby, it's hard to believe she's really married."

"Everything's hard to believe, it seems," commented Peter, as he washed his hands at the sink. "But it isn't everyone waits till they're forty before they turn their thoughts to marriage."

Mary laughed, a trifle self-consciously. "That's true," she admitted. "But why doesn't Miss Bobby get married? That's what I want to know. She isn't forty yet anyhow, and it isn't fitting for her to live alone at Little Staple. With poor Miss Matilda in her grave for the past month and the young ones gone to make a home for themselves in the North, she'll be terribly lonely, Peter, terribly lonely."

"Some people prefer loneliness," said Peter.

"Like Lord Ravencombe," suggested Mary, who was in a gossiping mood. "Do you know, Peter, they say he's a woman-hater, and if he doesn't marry—well, there, it will be funny, won't it?"

"Very funny," agreed Peter indulgently. "And it'll be even funnier if Silas doesn't either, won't it?"

"Oh, you've no call to laugh at me," said Mary, with a good-humoured smile that was not without a tinge of anxiety. "It isn't really funny, Peter. He takes things hard, does Silas, though he never says a word. I did so hope when they came back that there might be some sort of understanding between them. But I'm sure there isn't. Or else he's asked her and she's refused him, as I always feared she might. Anyhow," she checked a small sigh and picked up a cloth to polish a plate, "nothing's happened that we know of, and so we've just got to be patient."

"Oh, patient!" said Peter, pulling on the roller-towel behind the door with a force that seemed to testify to a somewhat different sentiment. "I'm fed up, that's what I am!"

"Good gracious, Peter!" Mary turned and surveyed him, round-eyed. "What ever for?"

So sudden was the announcement that it took her breath away. She almost suspected for a moment that it had been made in jest, but Peter's face told her otherwise. He was in earnest.

He looked at her moodily. "It's your fault," he said. "Mine?" gasped Mary in bewilderment.

"Yes. You're so durned unselfish." He thrust an arm unexpectedly around her. "At least, I suppose you are," he said. "But you never know with women. They're not the same as men."

"What ever are you talking about?" said Mary, between distress and gratification, for Peter's arm had a pleasant feeling about it.

"Well, can't you understand?" he said half-grudgingly. "I want to get married. I don't like this half-time business. I want you for full time and always."

"Oh, Peter!" said Mary, with a rush of colour that completely suffused her face and neck and even her bare comely arms. "Oh, my dear! But—but—"

"Yes, I know. It's always 'but,'" said Peter. "I've had enough of it, I tell you, even if you haven't. It's silly at our time of life to keep putting off things. I'm going to tell Silas."

"Oh, you mustn't!" cried Mary in distress. "It wouldn't be right—indeed it wouldn't! We couldn't possibly get married and leave poor Silas to fend for himself."

"I don't see why we shouldn't get married," said Peter on an obstinate note. "It isn't going to hurt anyone that I can see. You can still go on making his bed and his stockings till he gets a wife of his own."

"Oh, you don't want me to go away and leave him," said Mary, relieved. "But I don't know I'm sure whether he'd like us married, Peter. Wouldn't it make him feel sort of left out in the cold?"

"And what of you?" demanded Peter. "You who were prepared to stop on and work for him after he got married! Wouldn't you have been out in the cold?"

"That's different," protested Mary, beginning to twist the corner of the cloth she held. "Women are different. You said so yourself. And I'm so happy now, Peter." She smiled at him half-shyly. "I feel as if I'd do anything for anybody."

"Except me, eh?" said Peter, pulling her to him.

"Oh no, Peter! Oh no!" Mary's remonstrance began

in distress and ended in laughter, for Peter had a way with him that there was no resisting and when she emerged from his embrace she was too dishevelled to think of anything but the urgent need to put herself straight again before Silas came in. "I would be an awful thing if he found us and we hadn't told him," she declared. "He'd think the world was gone mad. No, Peter, not again! You go and sit down in the kitchen, my dear! I'll come in a minute, but I must tidy my hair. I'd be ashamed to show myself like this."

"Shan't go and sit down in the kitchen!" said Peter. "I'll stay and see you do it."

"Well, you mustn't touch me then," said Mary, wisely conceding the point. "It's the funniest thing in the world to have you making love to me, Peter. I don't know whether I'm standing on my head or my heels. Do you know I've caught myself making some dreadful mistakes lately, and it's all because of you."

Peter gave a short, gratified laugh. "Well, that's something," he said. "I began to think I wasn't having any effect on you at all."

"How can you?" said Mary. "As if I weren't thinking of you all day and—" She checked herself in some confusion.

"Half the night!" supplemented Peter, chuckling at her discomfiture. "That's all right, Polly. But we must do something more than think. It's time we acted. Dash it all, Silas, isn't such a dog in the manger as to stand in the way of other folks being happy if he can't be happy himself."

"Oh, I hope he will be happy," said Mary fervently.

"Don't tell him if he seems depressed, Peter! Choose your time!"

"I'm going to tell him now," said Peter. "It's not fair not to. He's just coming in."

He left her abruptly with the words to station himself in a waiting attitude in the kitchen, while poor Mary, tingling with embarrassment, put the finishing touches to her appearance and pulled down her sleeves.

Silas came in with Nero at his heels, looking weary and dispirited. He said nothing to Peter, merely sat down rather heavily in his customary chair and pulled a paper from his pocket. The window was open, and the soft spring air came in with a smell of wet earth and sheep. The bleating of lambs sounded from the field beyond the rickyard.

Peter looked at him at first with a species of resentment that slowly turned to deference.

"Seen Everett about that boundary?" he asked, breaking the silence.

Silas nodded without looking up. "He's going to put it in order."

"I wonder!" said Peter sarcastically.

"He says he will," said Silas, and added, "I'll see that he does."

Peter scraped his boot on the floor. "You can leave it to me," he said.

"What for?" said Silas.

"You don't want to be bothered dealing with a dirty dog like that," said Peter.

Silas looked up abruptly. "Why should you do all the dirty work?" he said.

"It's more suitable," said Peter.

A ghost of a smile touched Silas's sombre countenance.
"Don't talk like a damn fool, Peter!" he said.

"I don't," said Peter.

Silas looked at him with more attention. "What's up?" he said.

Peter glanced towards the scullery-door which was ajar, hesitated, then strode purposefully across and shut it. "I want a word with you," he said, returning.

"I see," said Silas.

His smile became genuine, and he reached out an unexpected hand to Peter. "That's all right, old chap," he said. "I'm very pleased. I've often wondered why you didn't think of it before."

"Oh, you knew, did you?" said Peter. His hand gripped hard upon Silas's; they looked straight into each other's eyes. "I've always been fond of her," he said. "But it was the thought of getting separated that did it."

"Who was going to separate you?" said Silas.

"If you'd been setting up a home of your own," explained Peter, "you wouldn't have wanted us hanging round. And then—"

"I see," said Silas. "Well, I'm not going to, Peter. But that needn't stop you doing it if you want to. You and Mary can get married as soon as you like. And you shall have Little Staple to live in—as soon as it's empty."

"Is it going to be empty?" said Peter.

"Pretty soon, I believe," said Silas. And then in answer to the question Peter would not utter: "There's an old lover in the case."

"Damn!" said Peter with all his force.

Silas laughed, but it was not a very mirthful sound. "Thanks, old chap!" he said. "But after all, one could

hardly expect anything else. I've known of it for a long time."

"Look here!" said Peter, speaking faster than usual. "We don't want to leave you, Mary and I. She'll tell you the same herself. And so far as I'm concerned, I'll stick by you and do all your dirty work for you as long as I live. That's what I've been trying to tell you all this time. And it isn't because you're heir to Ravencombe that I say it. It's always been the same—since we were little nippers together—and always will be. It's the same with Mary, too."

It was the most amazing outburst of his life, as though all the silent devotion of years had suddenly and irresistibly found vent. And Silas, as he heard it, got up quickly, as one who instinctively rises in the presence of something sacred. His hand still gripped the hand of Peter, but for a space he spoke no word.

Then, in a voice that was oddly shaken, he said, "That's damn' decent of you, Peter. But God alone knows why you should."

"I know too," said Peter briefly. And then, to hide a certain embarrassment, he turned and shouted over his shoulder, "Mary! Come on in! It's all right."

Mary came, trying to appear as placid as usual, and only succeeding in looking very fluttered and nervous. "Oh, Silas!" she said. "I do hope—I do hope—"

Silas went to meet her, took her two hands, and to her astonishment kissed her. "So do I," he said. "I hope you'll both be as happy as you deserve to be. This is the best thing that's happened for a long time. Now I know why all my buttons have got sewn on the wrong side lately."

"Oh, they haven't!" protested Mary. "I may have been foolish and forgetful, but I've never done such as that!"

Peter's laugh was good to hear. It dispelled all strain. "Oh, come and give us some tea?" he said. "Talking's thirsty work. And I can't waste any more time. I've got a job or two to do before it's dark."

They sat down, and the meal that followed was the cheeriest that Mary could remember for years. Silas had thrust his own affairs into the background and displayed a sympathy and consideration of which she had scarcely believed him capable.

When Peter got up to go, he remained to say a few kindly words to her alone which she treasured ever after in her heart.

"You've been a good friend to me, Mary," he said. "And I'm glad it's in my power to do something for you at last. You two must get married as soon as you conveniently can, and you shall have a home of your own before you're much older."

"I'd much sooner stay and make a home for you," said Mary truthfully. "I'd worry myself to a shadow if you'd no one to look after you."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Silas. "I'm not such a shorn lamb as that. I can look after myself better than you think."

Mary sighed. "It'd hurt me to see you try," she said. "Peter's the same. It'd hurt him too."

At which Silas smiled good-naturedly and turned to go. "Well, you've got to be happy, both of you," he said. "Mind that! I don't care about anything else, but I do care about that. So don't you forget it!"

"You're very, very good!" said Mary earnestly.

She watched him go with tears in her eyes, for his few words had touched her deeply. "He carries a heavy heart with him," she told herself sadly. "Oh, if only it could have been!"

For Silas's slow-moving figure told its own tale. He went with the gait of a tired man, unconscious of watching eyes.

He had meant to follow Peter. There was work to be done in the straw-strewn farmyard, but his feet did not carry him thither. An intense desire for solitude was upon him—the reaction after the enforced sociability of the past hour, and he went heavily away from the farm, scarcely recking of direction, until he found himself at the junction of the lanes whence the track led to Little Staple.

Here instinctively he halted, and Nero halted also, mutely sympathetic. How often in the past they had halted there! And now the time was coming when they would pass by quickly—very quickly—not bearing to linger. Even to-night he could not tell which would hurt him the most—to pause or to pass on. But having come upon an impulse that was hardly of his own directing, he stopped, in obedience to the same.

It was an evening upon which all the magic of Spring seemed to be poured forth like incense. In the lane—her lane—the early primroses were opening their first pale flowers. There was a rich scent of moss close to him. The bank was clothed with it in living green. The blood stirred within him. He knew just what such an evening would mean to her. He almost looked to see her coming

lightly down the track in search of those first exquisite flowers.

But she came not, and in the end with an involuntary sigh he turned to retrace his steps. What was the good of coming here to mourn? He would go back and work.

But even as he moved, a sudden sound came to him, arresting him. Something—someone—was coming down that green track. He heard the tread of a horse's hoofs.

The impulse to go came upon him then, urging him strongly, but he resisted it, asserting himself, mastering himself. Grimly, sturdily, he waited, his face set in hard lines, his eyes fixed in silent endurance. And Nero, with the intuition of his race, waited also, pressed closely against his leg—a dumb supporter.

Down the track came the thudding hoofs, slowly, fatefully. A horseman came into sight. He rode his animal superbly, with a free and dominating grace. His air was the air of the unconquerable. To Silas who had never before seen him on horseback there came a curious feeling of reverence—the instinctive homage accorded to that which is invincible.

He stood in silence waiting until the horseman was almost upon him, then put up a hand in salutation.

"Hullo!" said Ravencombe. Was it elation that sounded in his voice? "Why do you stand there like a mute, man? Is anybody dead?"

"Not that I know of," said Silas. "I didn't expect to see you."

Ravencombe's horse was nuzzling against his arm. He stroked the animal's neck with a kindly hand.

"I, on the contrary, was on my way to you," said Ravencombe. "Where do you live? Up there? Good!"

I'll come round another time." His dark face smiled down at Silas. His eyes were quite inscrutable.

"Is all well?" asked Silas abruptly.

He could not have said what prompted the question, but somehow it had to be asked. He knew that Ravencombe would laugh at it, but when he heard his laugh he wished he had held his peace; for it grated upon him almost intolerably.

"Of course!" said Ravencombe. "What did you expect?" And added, as Silas stood silent, "All is more than well, my dear fellow, thanks to you. I think I may safely say that the woman you love is well on the way to happiness. That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"Yes," Silas said, speaking slowly, as if the words were hard to utter. "That is what I wanted. I congratulate you. I hope—" he put a hand upon Ravencombe's knee—"I hope you will both be very happy."

"Thanks," said Ravencombe. He laid his hand upon Silas's, the smile still on his face. "You've been a good friend to her, Silas. She's told me so. And to me too, for which I am eternally grateful. Will you do one thing more—for her—for us both?"

"Need you ask?" said Silas.

Ravencombe's eyes still smiled down at him, their free, dauntless smile. "Well, you may not want to," he said. "But I think she'd like you—I think it would be decent of you—to go and congratulate her too. Will you do that?"

For one instant Silas hesitated. For one instant the bitterness of life seemed to rise up, monster-like, and smite him between the eyes. Then firmly, unflinchingly, he took command.

"Certainly I will," he said.

"Thanks!" said Ravencombe again. His hand gripped hard upon the hand beneath it, which after a moment or two stirred, turned upwards and grasped his own. "I know she would like your approval," he said. "You're a privileged person, Silas, and you deserve to be. And one thing more before you go! If by any chance you should come up against a gate marked Private, just open it and walk right in! You'll find you have a right."

He was gone with the words, still laughing, still careless of mien. As he reached the lane, Silas, still standing on the green track, heard his horse break into a canter. But he himself did not stir hand or foot until the sound had died completely away.

CHAPTER IX

THE OPEN DOOR

"JUST walk right in!" The words repeated themselves to Silas in curious cadences as he went up the grassy track. Somehow they had wiped out the bitterness, leaving only the sense of loss which perpetually weighed upon him now. It was decent of Ravencombe to have expressed it like that. He was thankful that he had not attempted to be more explicit, more intimate. He could not have endured pity or even sympathy. But the right hand of friendship,—that was a different thing. And Bobby would be the same, he knew. Bobby would always want to keep him for a friend. The thought pierced him, but he held it close, notwithstanding. She valued his friendship, and she should never look to him in vain for it. Having offered her all he had, he would never grudge her the very little with which she was content.

He quickened his footsteps a little. He was glad that he should be the first to see her in her happiness. Memories of that day that now seemed so long ago on which he had first broached the subject next his heart came to him as he went,—her kindness, her gentleness, and her faithfulness. Well, it had not been in his power to give her happiness, but he had at least helped her to gain it. Of this also he was glad.

He came within sight of the old farm, standing there in its trimness with its white gate closed. The ducks swam on the pond as usual, and the whole scene was supremely peaceful. The impulse came to him to pass on to the little farmyard and the door at the back by which he had been wont to enter; but he resisted it. Bobby would not be working in her kitchen to-night. Besides, now that she was left alone, she had installed a girl from the village to help her. In this also he had been instrumental. The life of drudgery was over for her. He opened the gate and went through.

Then he saw that the door beyond the porch was open—that door through which Rosemary had once sung her ribald rhyme.

"Oh, don't stay to rile us,
But run away, Silas,
Hickory dickory dock!"

He smiled faintly at the memory. She need not have objected so strongly to his presence after all.

He lifted his hand to knock, and then suddenly checked himself. The door on his right that led into the little parlour was ajar, and from beyond that door had come a sound.

It was a very low sound, but it seemed to drive straight through him. Without a moment's further pause, he pushed the door open and went right in.

She was sunk in a chair, all huddled together, and fighting—fighting desperately to control an agony of tears. She knew of his coming, but she could not face him, so overwhelmed was she by that piteous distress. And he who had seen her weep before did not hesitate now, but went down on his knees beside her and drew her to lean

against him. Little as he had expected to find her thus, he asked no question and showed no surprise. She was weary of course and still weak. With Matilda and Rosemary both gone, there was no one to turn to in either joy or sorrow. She who had served others so long and so patiently was left to meet her own needs alone.

She drew herself from him at last, drying her eyes. "I'm so sorry you found me like this," she said

"It doesn't matter, does it?" said Silas.

"I don't know," she said shakily. "It ought."

"I don't know why it should," he said. "We're friends, aren't we? I shan't abuse your confidence."

"As if you could!" said Bobby. "There!" She mustered a smile. "I'm better now. Do pull up a chair!"

He obeyed her, and she lay back in her own for a space in silence.

At length, "I've heard from Rosemary," she said. "She loves her Scotch home, and wants me to go and see her in it as soon as possible."

"It would do you good," said Silas.

"I don't think it would be very good for her at present," said Bobby. "They have got to settle down together—learn each other's ways. They will do that better alone."

"You always think of others first," he said.

"No, not always, Silas." Gently she contradicted him. "You for instance! No one can say that I have not used you for my own ends for as long as I have known you."

Silas shifted his position. Gratitude was worse than pity or sympathy and must be stopped at all costs. "I've never done anything for you that I didn't want to do," he told her bluntly. "I've always liked doing it; though I'm glad for your sake that it's over."

"Aren't you going to help me ever again then?" asked Bobby, with a slight drawing of the brows.

She did not look at him as she lay in her chair. Her expression was somewhat that of one who seeks the solution to a problem; but her distress had passed, and her attitude was one of peace.

"You won't need it after this," said Silas.

"Shan't I?" said Bobby. "It's a funny world, you know, Silas. Very often if the things you think you most want come to you, they turn out to be those for which you have the least use. And it's the other way round too. We never know what we really want. Only God knows that. It's much safer to leave it to Him."

"I think you generally do," said Silas.

"Oh no, I don't." She spoke with a certain wistfulness. "I've struggled—I've agonized sometimes—for what was out of reach, when, if I'd only known it, the thing I needed first and foremost was close at hand. And I suppose we change too as the years go on. At least I do. One thinks one never will. But one does."

"You can't help growing," said Silas.

She turned her face towards him in the fading light. "That's just it. Outgrowing some things and growing into others. I've been very slow to realize that, though you've said it to me before—in connection with Rosemary." She uttered a sigh. "You were very much wiser than I," she said. "I've made—a great many mistakes, Silas."

"Not one that I've ever seen," he said stoutly.

She smiled. "That shows how little you see of what is actually going on in front of you," she said.

"I see all I want to see," he said, a note of doggedness in his voice.

"Do you?" said Bobby. "I wonder."

Again for a space she was silent. Then in a lower voice, "Silas," she said, "do you remember once saying to me that though a gate might be shut against you, you couldn't be prevented from—looking over?"

"Yes," said Silas. He spoke curtly. "It was a cad's trick. I never did."

"Never?" she said, with a hint of surprise. "You never have?"

"Never." He repeated the word forcibly. "I've never looked over, never wanted to. I was content without."

She drew a long breath. "How like you!" she said. "That is what you meant by saying you see all you want to see?"

"It was," said Silas.

She stretched out her hand to him. "Silas, have you always believed in me?"

He took it, squarely facing her. "I have known you too well even to ask myself that," he said. "You were—just you. Nothing else mattered."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Thank you for that," she said.

He released her hand and got up. "Don't, please!" he said brusquely. "I can't stand it. You've nothing on earth to thank me for. I wish I could have done something for you really worth doing,—spared you all this pain."

She lay, looking up at him. "Some day," she said. "some day I will tell you all that you have done for me.

The pain is over now, Silas, or very nearly. Time will do the rest."

He turned from her with a blind, desperate movement. He could not bear any longer to stand there looking down upon her. His own pain was goading him almost beyond endurance.

"You're not going?" said Bobby's voice behind him. "Don't go yet! Didn't you come for any special reason?"

He stood struggling with himself. The reason for his coming! The reason!

"Don't go yet!" she said again, "unless you must! I want—I want to discuss the pigs with you."

He wheeled sharply, facing her again; but he still stood speechless.

She was sitting up now, her face raised. There was even something of challenge in her attitude. "We shall have to discuss them sooner or later," she said practically, "if we are going to be partners."

Partners! He stared at her, found his voice at last. "You don't think I came round to talk about pigs, do you?" he said.

"I don't know," said Bobby. "Why did you come?"

She looked so fragile in her black dress, yet withal she seemed to have donned a cloak of authority before which he was helpless.

She got up as he did not speak. "Shall we go out and look at them?" she said.

He made a movement to obey, then abruptly stopped himself and her also. "I'll tell you what I came for," he said, and it was the hardest thing he had ever uttered. "I came—to wish you joy."

"Oh!" said Bobby, as if startled.

He went on, recovering his strength as he did so. "I met Ravencombe in the lane just now. He told me all was well between you. So I came on—to wish you—every happiness."

His words came jerkily, but they were straight from his soul. He held out his hand to her as he spoke them, and she took it instantly between both her own and closely held it.

"Did he tell you that?" she said in a voice that shook.
"Oh, did he tell you that?"

And then—how it happened he scarcely knew—suddenly his hand was pressed hard to her heart so that its quick beating came to him. "And so you came to wish me happiness?" she said, her sweet face raised to him. "Oh, Silas—dear Silas—once more—how like you! And you didn't know—you never guessed—that the only person who could give it to me was you—you yourself!"

"What do you mean?" he said thickly, hoarsely, for it was as if the whole world were rocking under him.
"Bobby—for God's sake—what do you mean?"

She clasped his hand more closely to her breast. Her eyes were shining as though a torch had been lighted within her.

"He told you all was well between us," she said. "And he spoke the truth. All is well. But the old bond is gone. I don't quite know how to put it. We seem to have outgrown each other, that's all. And I—Silas, I have belonged to you ever since I offered myself to you in payment of a debt, and you wouldn't have me. But you'll have me now—I know you'll have me now—because I want you so."

He still gazed at her, unbelieving. "Am I dreaming?" he said. "Or is it true?"

"It is quite true," she said tremulously. "Dick has been very good to me. He came and offered me all he had. But—but—somehow I found I didn't want it. And—and he understood and went away. I was dreadfully sorry,—that was why you found me crying,—but I couldn't help it. He is a wanderer. He will go all over the world and find consolation and amusement. While I—all I want—" her voice thrilled suddenly—"all I want, Silas, is to stay at home, and mind the pigs—with you."

"Bobby!!" he said.

His arms drew her. She went into them like a bird into its nest. She clasped her own about his neck, laughing a little, sobbing a little.

"Are you seeing—more than you want to see—this time?" she asked him tenderly. "Now that the gate is open—don't you want—wouldn't you like—just to step inside? There is nothing there,—really, Silas—that will make you wish you hadn't."

"Bobby!" he said again, and on the second utterance of her name his voice broke. He bent his face to hers. "How I have wanted you—wanted you!" he whispered.

"And now you've got me," she whispered back—"all there is of me—all my heart's best love. Oh, Silas, I hope I shall make you happy."

"If I don't bring happiness to you," said Silas very deeply, "I'll die by my own hand."

There followed a short silence, and then out of it like the cheery chirp of a bird in the dawning came Bobby's voice.

"Well," she said briskly, "we've proposed to each other, accepted each other, and wished each other every happiness. Now let's get down to serious business! What about the pigs?"

THE END

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